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BLACK WINGS OF CTHULHU 3

SEVENTEEN TALES OF
LOVECRAFTIAN HORROR



EDITED BY S. T. JOSHI

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Black Wings of Cthulhu 3

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LOVECRAFTIAN HORROR

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“The one test of the really weird is simply this—whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe’s utmost rim.”

H. P. LOVECRAFT,
“SUPERNATURAL HORROR IN LITERATURE”

Introduction

IF WE HAVE LEARNED ANYTHING IN RECENT YEARS, which have seen a tremendous outpouring of excellent neo-Lovecraftian fiction from a wide array of writers, it is that the Lovecraftian idiom is capable of almost infinite extension and adaptation. The core elements of Lovecraft's fictional universe—the cosmic insignificance of all human life in the wake of the spatial and temporal boundlessness of the universe; a keen sense of the wonder and terror that lurks in obscure locales that the centuries have lashed with age; the suspicion that horrors from “outside” can easily be transmogrified into horrors that infest one's own mind, body, and spirit; and, in general, a disturbing sense of parallel worlds that lurk around the corner, just out of sight—are inexhaustibly malleable and transmutable, so that they can serve as the foundation for tales that, on the surface, seem anything but Lovecraftian.

And so it is that this third volume of *Black Wings* features everything from Joseph S. Pulver, Sr.'s impressionistic prose-poem set in Kingsport (“Down Black Staircases”) to Don Webb's half-comic tale of terrors in the dusty plains of Texas (“The Megalith Plague”). Topography, indeed, was a central concern of Lovecraft; and although we are given piquant flashes of Lovecraft's own Providence in the tales of two contemporary Rhode Islanders, Jonathan Thomas's “Houdini Fish” and Sam Gafford's “Weltschmerz” (not to mention Brian Stableford's “Further Beyond,” which reminds us that the early tale “From Beyond” is also set in Providence), we also see glimpses of the Southwest in Mollie L. Burleson's potent vignette “Hotel del Lago” and roam as far as China in Peter Cannon's “China Holiday.” Lovecraft's own constellation of invented New England towns continues to inspire weird writers today, as witness Jessica Amanda Salmonson and W. H. Pugmire's “Underneath an Arkham Moon,” which uses one of Lovecraft's lesser-known tales, “The Unnamable,” as a

springboard for a narrative whose sexual grotesquerie might have caused the Providence writer to faint right away.

It is, however, that unnerving sense of inscrutable worlds impinging on our own that frequently evokes the acme of terror in Lovecraft, and it is this motif that Donald Tyson has employed in vivid fashion in “Waller”—as, in a very different way, has Darrell Schweitzer in “Spiderwebs in the Dark.” Jason V Brock’s “The Man with the Horn” (which not coincidentally echoes, in its title, the great neo-Lovecraftian tale “Black Man with a Horn” by T. E. D. Klein) remarkably fuses cosmicism with psychological aberration in a manner that dimly recalls “The Shadow out of Time.” Another Lovecraftian motif, that of the ghoul, has been utilized in a number of impressive works of fiction in recent years, and Simon Strantzas adds his own distinctive variation on it in “Thistle’s Find.”

If there is one drawback to Lovecraft’s writing, it is perhaps in his general absence of characterization. Lovecraft justified this deficiency, after a fashion, by declaring in the early essay “The Defence Remains Open!” (1921): “I could not write about ‘ordinary people’ because I am not in the least interested in them... Man’s relations to man do not captivate my fancy. It is man’s relation to the cosmos—to the unknown—which alone arouses in me the spark of creative imagination.” As an exercise in making a virtue of necessity, this is undeniably clever; but today we expect weird fiction to shed light on the human condition as well as the condition of the infinite cosmos. It is the great triumph of neo-Lovecraftian fiction that it can fuse these two seemingly incompatible veins, as testified here from stories ranging from the brooding melancholy of Caitlín R. Kiernan’s “One Tree Hill (The World as Cataclysm)” to the domestic tragedy of Richard Gavin’s “The Hag Stone” to the emotional intensity of Mark Howard Jones’s “The Turn of the Tide” and Lois Gresh’s “Necrotic Cove” to the pungent cynicism (reminiscent perhaps of John Collier if not of the pioneering writer of satirical horror, Ambrose Bierce) of Donald R. Burleson’s “Dimply Dolly Doofy.”

It is safe to say that we have entered something of a golden age of neo-Lovecraftian writing. Gone are the stilted and mechanical pastiches that sought merely to drop the name of some new god or place into a story that is otherwise antipodal to the essence of Lovecraft’s vision; gone too are those unduly slavish imitations that seek merely to rewrite Lovecraft’s own

narratives. What we see in the work of contemporary writers is a profound appreciation of the uniqueness of Lovecraft's literary achievement melded with a desire to use that achievement as the springboard for strikingly original work that infuses Lovecraftian themes, imagery, and conceptions in tales whose vitality and distinctiveness are evident for all to see.

S. T. Joshi
Seattle, Washington
August 2012

Houdini Fish

JONATHAN THOMAS

Jonathan Thomas is a native of Providence, R.I., whose story collections include Stories from the Big Black House (Radio Void Press, 1992), Midnight Call and Other Stories (Hippocampus Press, 2008), and Tempting Providence and Other Stories (Hippocampus Press, 2010). Arcane Wisdom has published his novel, The Color Over Occam, and more recent short stories have appeared in Black Wings I and Black Wings II (both from PS Publishing), A Mountain Walked (Centipede Press), and Nameless (Cycatrix Press).

Catch me, find me, see me if you can I am the guilt of an honest man.

ROBIN WILLIAMSON

AS A RULE I WASHED UP BEFORE LUNCH, ESPECIALLY after handling the luminous machine parts. Departmental men's room was all mine, aside from the mild funk of previous tenant. Something that swam in circles troubled the surface of pink liquid soap, about due for a refill. I pushed up on the nozzle of clear plastic dispenser. Into my cupped palm dropped a gob of fragrant goo and then a thrashing Houdini fish, of brighter pink than its medium.

It was the length of two knuckles and stick-figure thin, eel-like but for the flaring dorsal fin and tail that folded flat along slippery skin, virtually disappearing, to let it shimmy through the teeniest circumferences. Hence the allusion to Houdini.

Not so long ago, the discovery of a fish in liquid soap would have qualified as miraculous, but this was the third in two weeks for me. I acted humanely and unscrewed the dispenser's metal cap and tipped critter back into its habitat, and made a mental note to ask the janitor to please add more soap. Some people would have rinsed squirmy varmints down the drain, but that was callous in my book. Whatever lived and breathed in soap was unlikely to survive in the same squalid conditions as a goldfish. The present specimen just needed an inch more wiggle room to be content, I reckoned.

And why not be nice to the implausible fauna? None of it, on anecdotal evidence, had attempted even trial nibble at human flesh in lavatories across campus. Its proper diet defied speculation, unless soap were food as well as home. The dispensers never used to deplete so soon, to that much I'd testify.

How vagrant exo-species had infiltrated them in the first place was no less mystifying. Custodians swore they poured nothing "foreign" from ponderous feeder jugs into *de facto* fishbowls, and 24/7 racing round and round never churned up rosy gunk till days after a refill.

A thousand associated questions went begging. But to me, this mere slip of a fish, steeped in a pint of soap and a Sargasso of riddles, was foremost incredible for the lack of inquiry it aroused. I couldn't be alone among the faculty in wondering about its geographic range, or could I? The news media, university publications, myriad blogs, and the City of Providence website were uniformly mum on the subject of pink anomalies.

Today, moreover, was like any other in the refectory, where I overheard no mention of said anomalies while nudging my tray through stop-and-go lunch line or dining solo at underlit corner table. Not that people were in denial. The Houdini fish met with bland acceptance as if it had always been there, had maybe dropped off our radar awhile, but wasn't worth fussing over just because it was back.

To the best of my knowledge, nobody debated whether biologic upstarts were the product of genetic tampering or a breach between this world and elsewhere. Outlandish theories, yes, but this was an outlandish animal. Nor had anyone, in earshot or in print, expressed surprise that these creatures rated such meager curiosity, which was as perturbing to me as the creatures themselves.

My own pet theory contended that the fish had always been here, and only our power to perceive them had changed, coupled with the mindset that since normal perception now included them, it was ergo normal to perceive them. In this, I had what we scientists call "parsimony" on my side, i.e., I was positing simply a shift in people, and not in people and nature and/or the laws of physics.

But what had triggered this no less outlandish reboot in our brains? I believed the answer was literally under my nose eight hours each workday, though I had nothing stronger than coincidence and gut instinct to support me. And embarrassingly, weeks went by before it dawned on me that Houdini fish had appeared right after I'd supervised the exhumation of glowing smithereens.

Going into that project, I hadn't banked on raising more than potsherds, peach pits, and rusty nails, and I'd intended nothing more than teaching the rudiments of excavation to undergrads who'd never touched a trowel. The courtyards of the freshmen dorm complex West Quad were due for a reseeded, and the drainpipes under them needed replacement. With all that dirt slated for upheaval, what harm in letting Anthro 101 delve into it first?

The Quad had gone up in the 1950s at the expense of two historic blocks on Benevolent Street, between Benefit and Brown. With permission from University Hall and Buildings and Grounds, I had a week during spring semester to sink a trench and reclaim anything the Eisenhower-era bulldozers hadn't pulverized, before modern backhoes wrought their own havoc.

According to the deed in university files, the kids had dug their shovels into the site of the former Crawford Tillinghast house, which a photo at the Historical Society depicted as a plain, snug domicile of bricks and black shutters, a product of the lull between Greek Revival and Victorian pretenses. It had huddled at the end of a narrow cobbled lane, behind a pair of Federal mansions that fronted the sidewalk. How sad that such venerable charm had bitten the dust for the sake of nondescript, hulking barracks, as it had all over College Hill. My wife would have told me yet again to get over it or go work for someone else, but she was too often out of town for Ivy League depredations to weigh on her.

From the tidbits I gleaned about Crawford Tillinghast, his relative seclusion within a crowded neighborhood must have suited him well. City Archives, the Office of Vital Statistics, and tax rolls portrayed him as an unmarried homebody, with servants for company and no conventional employment. Several volumes of the *House Directory and Family Address Book* list his occupation as “philosopher,” before he vanished from that and all other public annals after 1920. His was one of those founding families of Providence that had fanned out into every stratum of society, from statesman to hit man, and “old money” sustained his proverbial “shabby gentility.”

A modern kinsman characterized him as an “eccentric inventor” but, in keeping with fabled Yankee reticence, demurred from further comment on Crawford’s personality, as if another century’s black sheep were still a family embarrassment. During that phone interview, my request for access to a picture of Crawford was also handily rebuffed with the patrician drawl, “I’ve no idea where such a thing might be.” Dead air followed as I cast about for a seemlier topic. He also pleaded ignorance regarding the balance of Crawford’s life post-1920, and no paperwork or microfiche at City Hall or the *Providence Journal* enlightened me, as if the records were defective or had been expunged through familial clout.

After Crawford’s departure from the *House Directory*, his property stood derelict for decades till the Tillinghasts bequeathed it to the university, which apparently didn’t have to ask twice. In their correspondence to the Office of Gifts and Endowments, Crawford’s heirs professed an enthusiasm for new dorm construction that read between the lines as relief at unloading the house and seeing it demolished.

True to New England form, everything of value down to doorknobs and light bulbs had been stripped before the house changed hands. Or so I gathered during the dig down to Crawford's cellar floor that unearthed little beyond the typical bottle caps and hambones and shirt buttons. That little, however, was more confounding and compelling than a truckload of the usual detritus.

The shale foundation of the house had caved inward, back when heavy equipment had dumped and graded tons of fill, the blank canvas on which to create the Quad. On top of and among the fieldstones, and therefore previously entombed behind them, were brass and steel fragments of some custom-built machine, neither tarnished nor rusty. And plainly these remnants were all of a piece, based on weak but perturbing purplish glow from each least wringer and rivet divested of dirt. I sent someone to the Geology Department for the nearest Geiger counter, and it picked up nary a roentgen. The scraps moreover gave off no static charge or heat, though to judge by their hue, they might have been the remains of some economy-size violet-ray generator, still shedding wan residuum.

Those gizmos, basically elaborate joy buzzers, had captivated health faddists of a century ago, who bought into claims that tinted currents cured a range of ailments from cancer to frigidity. The fragments that my sophomores bagged and boxed and toted to the anthropology lab, though, were too numerous and miscellaneous to jibe with any online illustrations of patented snake-oil mechanisms. I imagined this debris would add up to some brainchild of the "eccentric inventor," but hadn't the foggiest why it had been hidden, and by whom.

Whenever I didn't have classes to teach or office hours or other obligations of untenured faculty, I'd tinker with my fluorescent jigsaw of a device, premising I could divine what it did and why it glowed if I could reassemble enough of it. A hundred percent restoration was impossible because several baggies contained slivers of glass, sorted by color, of deficient quantity to guess their original shape and dimensions. Nonetheless, undeterred by lack of aptitude, I'd refit roughly ten percent of the coils and baffles and cogwheels in a couple of weeks.

The kids didn't share my fascination. Unanimously, to varying degrees, they were nervous around the purple light, and I didn't force them to assist me. That wouldn't have been nice, any more than washing a Houdini fish

down the drain. Admittedly, something was creepy about the ongoing glow, as if the machine, despite its destruction, were still running, performing its function, incapable of being deactivated once it had been turned on.

Yes, I could have brought in expertise from Engineering, and I might easily have lost control over my find, and credit for it as well. I've no naïveté about the level of respect a "soft science" like mine is accorded on this campus. Besides, did Tillinghast's contraption necessarily operate on a principle that a run-of-the-mill technologist would grasp any better than I would? Bottom line: the material culture an archaeologist unearths is artifacts, and artifacts belong in an Anthropology Department for proper handling and conservation.

After locking up the lab come evening, I habitually strolled home and stayed put. Nocturnal crime has been on the rise of late around campus, predictably what with the lousy economy, and my Fox Point neighborhood of students, faculty, and blue-collar Portuguese families hasn't been immune. My wife and I are blessed with a comfy third floor in a quiet triple-decker, and too bad Phoebe's not here more to appreciate it. On the other hand, maybe being apart so often has saved us from growing apart, or at least from focusing on any expansive rift. As good a formula for wedded bliss as any?

I was, in upshot, quite used to holding the fort, which boiled down to dumping shrimp flakes into Phoebe's tank of neon tetras. Last Friday, that and surfing for less guilty viewing than *20/20* had been about the size of my dance card. I hadn't expected burglary to enter into it, but who does? Larceny, anyhow, was the apparent story on eventually noticing what had happened. After supper I scattered fish food across aquarium surface, only to find no takers. The wife's lovely tropicals were gone. Stolen, I had to infer, yet nothing else was missing, and no signs of break-in were visible at doors or windows. This wasn't even the sort of theft I could bother the police with, for all they'd do was doubt my sanity or sincerity. I unplugged the tank's hood light, filter, and heater. Why waste power?

The hell of it was, as the night wore on, resentment at thievery cooled and ebbed away. The absence of fish in the tank rated the same blasé acceptance as the presence of fish in soap. Someone or something had poached a school of tetras, and so what? Phoebe didn't often ask about the fish when she phoned, and I'd be foolish volunteering anything. Her initial

agitation, I figured, would lapse into apathy as quickly as mine if she got the news here first. Of course, the longer she was out on the road, the longer I could avoid controversy, but that was no way for a devoted husband to think.

As I went out to retrieve the paper Saturday morning, another untoward sight awaited me, and this one too I downplayed, far longer than did me credit. Twin heaps of clothing cluttered the sidewalk. From the porch I stared them down as if reprobates still occupied them, while declining to focus on specific garments. Were these the souvenirs of sex in the bushes, or of sloppy-drunk foray to the 24-hour laundromat? I was young once myself, but good grief!

That evening, as usual, I courted disappointment by tuning in local news for any exposé on pink fish. Instead, I learned that a preppie and four East Side collegiates had gone AWOL in the past few days. Police weren't ready to assume or rule out foul play. Voiceover appealed to the public for information, as snapshots of the missing scrolled by. Those bundles of clothing out front did spring to mind, but only to the point of pondering whether their owners were still missing in action or had slunk back to reclaim sullied articles. My lukewarm concern didn't stir me to go check out the window.

I should have put two and two together immediately, yet shied from connecting dots between abducted youth and purloined tetras and unremarked Houdini fish and luminous debris. To fob off human potential for monstrosity on some cosmic agency felt like flawed thinking, a copout, a throwback to blaming the devil and letting moral imperative off the hook. I was too much a man of science, "soft" science or not, to lumber into that pitfall.

I next ventured out of doors for the Sunday paper. The disreputable heaps of apparel lay unmolested. This is, after all, a sleepy side street, and who more than I would want to touch them? Upstairs, I unsheathed the *Journal* from orange plastic sleeve, and yesterday's snapshots of kidnapees dominated page one.

At second glance, the gravity of the situation sank in. One path to peace of mind was open. I grabbed magenta rubber gloves from under kitchen sink and rummaged a sturdy, humerus-length stick from under the boxwoods screening the porch. Struggling into the gloves would have been

easier after some coffee. I refrained from poking into the castoffs that contained a bra and tampon. In the other bunch I thumped a wallet and pried it out of Dockers pocket. It held three bucks, a RISD I.D., and a Nordstrom credit card. The name embossed in plastic was not among those in the photo caption, but that didn't exempt me from step two toward a quiet conscience.

I called the cops. The desk officer picked up on the tenth ring. Evidence maybe pertaining to the missing young people, I said, was down on my sidewalk. "What sort of evidence?" he barked.

At his combative tone I drew a momentary blank before rallying to say, "Clothing and personal effects." Okay, he'd send a car. Begrudgingly, as if appeasing a pest. I sat with my coffee on the front steps to ensure no garments crawled off at the last minute.

During my third cup, two squad cars pulled up, a pair of uniformed cops in one and a pair of suits in the other. They glowered at the abandoned articles as if they'd seen the like before and weren't happy to see these now. The more rumpled, putty-faced plainclothesman directed the uniforms in their forensic chores. His lean, more debonair partner introduced himself, with a jerky handshake, as Detective Delacroix. He pronounced it "Della Croy." I presumed he dyed his hair and mustache to get them that exquisitely black. His chestnut eyes were taking continuous stock.

His questions soon acquired the character of hostile catechism. When had I first observed the suspicious items? Yesterday morning? Why didn't I report them right away?

I'd only heard about the abductions, or whatever they were, this morning, I argued, deciding I could fudge by twelve or fourteen hours if he was going to be such a hardass.

Did I touch any of the materials under investigation? Yes, I'd removed a wallet, and it was upstairs. Why had I tampered with a crime scene? Well, I wouldn't have considered it a crime scene had I not found the wallet, and to prevent contamination of evidence I'd been wearing gloves, for which not a tad of gratitude was forthcoming.

Would I mind if he came up and got the wallet? I couldn't very well say no, though inwardly I vowed that henceforth someone else could reprise the thankless role of good citizen.

I couldn't interest him in any coffee. He proceeded straight to the wallet when I pointed at it, on a corner of the dining room table. From inner jacket pocket he produced white gloves and a Ziploc container. I'd have recommended a user-friendlier brand of bags, based on my own lengthy experience securing artifacts, but with his snippy attitude, the hell with him. I was already sorry for inviting him in.

Once he'd stashed his prize, he quizzed me on my term of occupancy in the apartment, my marital status, and my livelihood. In the meantime he strode around and rubbernecked, with the overbearing air of owning the place. I've no idea what keepsakes he'd have deemed proper to an archaeologist, but he ogled Phoenician oil lamps, Gallo-Roman priapic statuettes, and Egyptian faience amulets as if all might be used to hide or smoke illicit substances. Or as if I'd looted them.

He brightened on reaching the aquarium, till he discovered it was empty. "No fish in here?" His tone was accusatory.

"They were stolen. Sometime Friday." Damn, I'd rather that hadn't come out, but his zealous tour of inspection was too off-putting for me to ad lib a sensible lie. Thank God he was miles from ferreting out my quarter ounce of stale cannabis.

His brown eyes narrowed dubiously. Was I joking? Trying to throw him off his game? Incredulous or not, he didn't grill me, thank God, on why I also hadn't reported that, or how much else was gone. I yearned for him to go jangle someone else's nerves ASAP, and I doubt he'd have disagreed that vanished youngsters rated more attention than burgled tetras.

Then I had cause to regret that burgled tetras hadn't distracted him. He approached an uncomfortable inch inside my personal space and demanded, "Where were you for the last six nights?"

"Monday through Friday, I left campus around suppertime and came back here. I didn't go out again. I stayed in last night, too." My eyes were fixed on his, with the steadfastness of the innocent.

"Who could verify that?"

"Nobody. I was by myself for the duration."

He nodded, maintaining eye contact all the while.

"Wait a minute. You're not implying I had anything to do with these kidnappings, are you?"

He didn't say. He stared at the threadbare Berber carpet as if embarrassed at my outburst. "So your wife's been out of town?"

"She's been away for the month."

"And when's she coming back?"

"Next week sometime. She's not sure yet."

His line of sight swerved from the carpet back to me. "Do you have any accomplices?" His delivery was casual, as if asking for a glass of water.

"What?" How dare he, after I welcomed him into my home? Offered him coffee? "What the hell kind of trick question is that? Why would I have accomplices?"

"Thank you. That should do it for now." He cast judgmental parting squint at the desolate aquarium and turned on his heel. Just like that, our interview was over. Except that my agenda found impulsive voice at the last instant. "At the precinct house, do you have pink fish in your liquid soap?" I called after him.

He brusquely about-faced with one foot out the door. "No, they're white. Like the soap. Why?"

"The ones in my department are pink." Not exactly a scintillating reply, and it convinced Delacroix that no further exchange with me was necessary. He resumed exiting as if I hadn't said anything.

He neglected to shut the door behind him. I stared out at the sunny landing while trying to absorb the ugly reality of becoming a "person of interest." And that, fundamentally, because I'd let my conscience get me "involved." Plus, dammit, I'd forgotten my cup on porch railing, where it had to be cold by now and perhaps peppered with drowning gnats. I went and retrieved it, tossed contents unseen into the bushes, and noted that the clothes were gone, with a pair of chalk outlines in their place, as if *corpora delicti* had indeed occupied them.

The cops weren't admitting yet that criminality was afoot, but that's how they were operating. And Delacroix, it dawned on me, was likely more on the ball than he realized. No, I hadn't waylaid people and stripped and disposed of their bodies. Yet if uncovering Tillinghast's debris had somehow brought Houdini fish into the world, it might also have snatched victims out of it, or brought in additional, man-eating species. In which case, yes, I was at involuntary fault, though in no wise conceivable to hardheaded Delacroix.

All the same, the onus was on me. I had a unique handle, right or wrong, on the wherefore of putative crime spree. I alone might be able to stop it. Since I no longer had tetras to trot home and feed, I burned nightly oil at the department, futzing with outré filaments and pipes till headache set in. Then I washed my hands, bid Houdini fish au revoir, and flagged down University shuttle bus on Hope Street. I had nine measly blocks to ride, but doorstep service these days was preferable to the lurking perils of nocturnal promenade.

My lab work was predicated on the theory that the intact device had projected an insidious radiation in which soap-dwelling fish, and worse, entered human perceptions, and vice versa. That radiation, with its short-range purple blush, had become intrinsic to each part of the device, regardless of breakage. Were I to rebuild enough for a control panel to present itself, pulling a lever might, I prayed, switch off the machine and kill its emanations and send everything alien back where it belonged. Yes, that was my best excuse for a plan.

I wasn't unmindful that earth had exerted a damping effect all those years on the violet radiance. I could rebury the entire load, and maybe prevent further trespass from elsewhere. But would entities already here be expelled? And had any paired off yet to breed? I had to go with my gut, and it warned of time lost, lives lost, if reinterment accomplished nothing.

I also had to resist temptation to dump fluorescing miscellany on Engineering Department doormat, ring the bell, and run. Possessive pride had earlier kept me from sharing my find, and now engineering types, safe to say, would laugh in my face halfway through my alarmist spiel. This mission of mine was strictly solo, which was just as well if the device actually had no bearing on local felonies.

When Friday rolled around again, I'd reintegrated roughly half the hundred-plus bits, shed some pounds by skipping suppers, and listened to messages on home voicemail too late to return them. Phoebe was due back on the Acela next Wednesday evening. I'd have to insist she ride a cab up the hill. To let her walk would be reckless, and my driver's license had expired ages ago. Also, Delacroix was intent on a follow-up conversation, and would I stop in at his office tomorrow? Three such communiqués in as many days conveyed mounting impatience. Well, he knew where I lived,

and where I worked. Why interrupt my vital efforts to indulge his petty bias against me?

Plus, I had to play catch-up with recent news. Two postdocs, a waitress, and a Whole Foods clerk had dropped into MIA limbo. The pressure was on, and it behooved me to chuck the whole frustrating *mélange* into cardboard file box and lug it home. Technically, yes, the material was University property and I was stealing it. But stealthy predator was unlikely to ease off for the weekend, and neither should I.

I slapped the lid on the box and exited into pale setting sunlight. Shuttle service wouldn't start for two hours, forcing me to hoof it with increasingly awkward, ponderous freight. Couldn't be helped. Purple rays escaping chinks and seams in cardboard container would prompt unwelcome attention on a nighttime bus, whereas spooky emissions shouldn't loom as garish on daylit sidewalks, when those sidewalks theoretically posed less danger.

But how well can mere theory model reality? I had the better part of my trek to go when the urge to rest aching arms asserted itself. On my left was deconsecrated Baptist church, repurposed as condos in the '80s. The square brick belfry's Gothic windows framed ventilation louvers, ineffectually shielded from nesting bats and pigeons by tattered wire screens. The light had relaxed into that lambent gold unique to this town, and the iron handrails flanking granite steps looked awfully inviting.

I was about to lower my burden onto the rail and balance it against my stomach, when the gilded ambience shifted to a seasick green. Meanwhile the belfry had apparently cast an arresting shadow on me. I shuffled backward without getting out from under it and belatedly grasped the obvious. The sun was setting not behind the church but behind the houses across the street, in the west as usual. I craned my neck toward the greenish heavens, faced with two dismal choices. Either something sizable had me in its oncoming shadow, or this wasn't a shadow according to Webster.

Too unnerved to govern my actions, I whipped around to confront anything sneaking up on me. Metal components slid and clanked to one side of the box, which would have tumbled from my hands if I hadn't hastily clutched tighter. As it was, the lid came loose and released a mini-aurora borealis. The shadow, or whatever it was, lifted, and the dusk faded to a more wholesome gray.

I hustled on, resolving to put up with sore arms for another five blocks. If I'd been in the same danger as previous fatalities, it had passed. Too bad that believing so did nothing to calm me. The purple radiance, I conjectured, may have worked as a repellant. Or I was simply keyed up and attaching false importance to atmospheric subtleties. That didn't, though, invalidate the principle I stored for future reference: we humans might be plainly visible to things from elsewhere that might be quite invisible to us.

Another sort of predator was parked out front in a late-model off-beige Impala. The driver's head was tilted as he watched my approach through rearview mirror. He retrained his sights on me after he got out and tossed cold dregs from Dunkin' Donuts travel mug into scraggly grass below the boxwoods. Delacroix bypassed sociable greetings. "Ignoring me's not such a good idea. You academic types think you're above it all, don't you?"

I shook my earnest head. "Sorry. I've been tied up with urgent lab work every night."

He didn't bother disputing that, as if above such mealy-mouthed excuses himself. He opened passenger-side door, pitched plastic mug to the floor, and slammed the door. He nodded toward the box. "What's in there?"

"It's the project I've been losing sleep over." Why volunteer to show him? If he wanted a peek, he wouldn't be shy about it.

"You're looking pretty haggard. Okay then, go ahead up. I'll follow." Did cops study imposing themselves at the academy, or was Delacroix inherently gifted? "I'd like to see what you've been so busy with, if you don't mind."

I let brief eye contact serve as acquiescence and trudged forward. Venting my irritation wouldn't get me anywhere. He spared me further chat till the box perched on the table where the wallet had lain last week. I, at least, was uncomfortable in the lowering silence. Was I supposed to offer him a soft drink? A beer?

"Sometime tonight, please?" Fine, you overbearing bastard, I'll stop trying to play the gracious host. I'd hit every light switch on the way in, including the dining room overhead, hoping to render the violet emissions less blatant. I unceremoniously flipped the cardboard lid clattering to the floor. Delacroix bent slightly closer to the opening and his eyes widened. His newly mauve complexion made me wince.

"Is this an antique generator you're rebuilding?"

I brightened in spite of the circumstances. Very impressive! There was a brain behind the jackboot persona. Of course the pieces would add up to a generator, a term I'd never actually resorted to myself. "Why yes, I doubt it could be anything else."

"How come it's glowing?"

"That's what I want to find out. I've determined the artifacts aren't radioactive, if you were worried."

He shrugged. "You're the one with your face in it day and night. Anyway," he waved dismissively at the box as he straightened his spine, "not why I'm here."

From an inside jacket pocket he pulled and unfolded a sheet of Xerox paper. He watched me the whole while as if I might jump him any second. He thrust the paper under my nose. "Know her?"

I couldn't immediately tell what, let alone who, was in front of me. Head and shoulders in shaky resolution must have been downloaded, cropped, and blown up from a gallery in Facebook or the like. But yes, I did recognize her, and my heart turned to lead as I guessed where this was going. "She was enrolled in one of my classes."

"Was?"

"If she hadn't disappeared, why would you be showing me her picture?"

"You didn't notice she was absent the last couple of days?"

"It's a big survey course. Taking roll call wouldn't leave me time to teach."

"So you're denying she was a memorable student. You might be interested to learn you had the opposite effect on her. In fact, right before she vanished, she characterized you as 'creepy' and 'borderline pathological.' Any idea why?"

"No. I'd never even interacted with her."

"Are you sure?"

"Did she say I had?" Delacroix had to be quoting out of context, deleting pertinent verbiage just to faze me, and he was succeeding. Some stranger, a literal face in the crowd, had been badmouthing me, and to what end, apart from incriminating me in the eyes of the law? And I couldn't vent feelings of righteous indignation and betrayal, could I, because she was suddenly a crime statistic. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*, right?

Delacroix was hanging on my next words, but he couldn't have entertained serious prospects of a confession. I inquired, "What did the other missing persons have to say about me?"

"Very funny." One fraught connection did not an airtight case make, did it? The only excuse for anyone to call me "pathological," and it was a stretch, would have been my febrile obsession to reconstruct Tillinghast's generator, and how ironic would it be if a casualty's catty statement had condemned me for doing my best to prevent further deaths? Especially if the outcome was my arrest as the serial killer? If she had ever focused balefully on me in the lab, I'd been concentrating too hard to feel it.

Delacroix had let up needling me and was resurveying my knickknacks and the vacant fish tank, as if they were new to him. He seemed to approve no more than on the first go-round, but abstained from comment. Confusion and uncertainty clouded his brow as if he'd been afflicted with *déjà vu*. He blinked at me and cleared his throat. "Anything you'd care to get off your chest?" He was merely going through the motions of harassing me now. Too disoriented, blindsided somehow, for his heart to be in it. I couldn't account for that, but I wasn't complaining.

A change of subject might be salutary for both of us. "I'm a little surprised there's no curfew in effect."

"Me too." He plucked the Xerox portrait from my grip, refolded and repocketed it. "You can't even tell me her name, can you?"

"I'm seldom able to match faces in the classroom with names on test papers. That's modern education for you."

"For you, maybe. Pretty sad." Something about my modest abode was definitely getting under his skin. The purple tinge escaping the box? "I've seen enough of you for one evening. Good luck with your doohickey. Stay in town." Again he neglected to shut the door behind him. Despite faulty manners, in Delacroix I did find encouraging proof that vanishing persons, unlike vanishing tetras, weren't yet "out of sight, out of mind." The influence of the "doohickey," so far anyhow, had its limits.

Nor did Delacroix have to fret about me as a flight risk. Skipping town was hardly an issue, since I was averse to leaving the apartment. And home wasn't necessarily a sanctuary, as the fishless aquarium reminded me. With a nylon cord I strung one of Tillinghast's luminous springs for a necklace, a latterday equivalent of my Egyptian faience charms.

Obviously I never disappeared, but impromptu talisman afforded me no help in my project. By Monday morning, my ambition was shot to hell. I'd progressed after forty-eight hours to the maddening stage of finding that the parts on the table were too interchangeable. Two-thirds of the elements did constitute an abstract, vaguely Art Nouveau sculpture, which left about three dozen loose items that wouldn't go with one another or with the partial restoration.

I'd wasted the bulk of a precious week after all, and would have to start from scratch and pray I didn't make a fresh batch of errors. People and their accustomed world were meanwhile in jeopardy, and it was my bungling fault. Plan B resurfaced as a more rational alternative. In hindsight, I'd have learned whether it was effective in much less time than I'd squandered on fruitless tinkering.

Behind the house was a forsaken, rectangular weedlot of a backyard, enclosed on three sides by weathered palisade fence, half of whose pointy tips were broken off. That was where, after breakfast, I carried shovel and a Stop & Shop paper bag stuffed with mechanical jumble. I cheated a bit by retaining the steel spring around my neck. Why not assess first whether burying 99% of the device banished Houdini fish from our dimension, before I disposed of my wearable "health insurance"?

I dug down two feet and some inches into rusty yellow sand. I gave no thought to laboring quietly, to scouting for witnesses in neighboring upper-story windows. Why should inhuming a load of scrap metal, or to an outside view a plain brown sack, rouse suspicions? Most likely and logically I was disposing of dead cat or parrot or hamster. Logic also recommended a backyard grave for convenience's sake, in case I had to resume cobbling together the "doohickey."

A leisurely shower and lunch before my one o'clock lecture were still in the cards after completing the job. When I swung by the lab later, no one remarked on the absent artifacts, or on absent classmate for that matter. Noses to the collective grindstone. Except now, paranoia tugged at my sleeve and whispered, How many of these kids were feigning tunnel vision because they found me "creepy"?

More felicitously, no Houdini fish swam in the soap. That guaranteed me nothing, though. Someone might have rinsed it down the drain, but on mulling how to ask if anyone in the lab could remember doing so, my brain

stalled out. Or had the device's output inhibited my wits, as it had inhibited curiosity about the fish?

In the interim till Phoebe's homecoming, I encountered no Houdini fish, no Delacroix, no malign nimbus hovering behind me. Delacroix, I surmised, must have had other leads to chase besides me, thank God, red herrings though they had to be. Nor did the lack of something stalking me, like the lack of fish in soap, mean that reburial had achieved its goal. The prophylactic magic of my necklace might simply have kept the boggy at bay.

Hence when Phoebe phoned to announce she was at the train station, I firmly reiterated that she hail a taxi, but needn't have bothered. She was already up to speed about the "East Side Snatcher," who'd made the *LA Times* and BBC News.

Would she perceive her fish were gone the second she walked in? After a minute? An hour? On other occasions, her approaching taxi caught my ear. Not tonight. The trunk slammed, and a subjective instant later, the key jingled in the lock downstairs, and the wheels of her suitcase were ka-thunking rapidly against each step as she climbed. I managed to relieve her of luggage when she had a scant flight and a half to go.

On the landing we hugged and kissed and genuinely enjoyed the novelty of each other's presence. She waltzed in ahead of me while I dragged her luggage the last few yards. At the threshold I stopped short as she shouted while hanging paisley twill blazer in the closet, "What's that pile of clothing doing out front? That's not one of your suits, is it?"

I went racing downstairs, had almost made it to the first floor, and voted to plunge on, flinching, when I heard, "Where the hell are the tetras?" Chances were nil, weren't they, that apathy about the tropicals would take hold of Phoebe before I got back? Was I a heel wishing she'd postponed her return?

The garments were child's play to locate. Creamy seersucker fabric fairly shone in the dimness between streetlights. New bundle overlapped the smudgy chalk boundaries of old bundles. Even if beige Impala weren't parked across the street, my knees would have weakened with a queasy certainty of whom the invisible beast had disrobed, or devoured, or disintegrated. Whatever had transpired was, as usual, bloodless, which made it bearable to poke through jacket pockets for confirmatory badge. Brown Oxfords were, for reasons I didn't dwell on, pointing in opposite

directions, and the folds of pinstripe shirt swaddled a bulging letter-size envelope.

Headache began to throb as I gazed on the envelope in my clammy grasp. Of course its contents would relate to me. A search warrant? An arrest warrant? I balked at undoing the flap. I couldn't picture anything it could be that wouldn't be too much right now. I dropped the envelope on top of Delacroix's other earthly remnants.

I turned my beleaguered sights toward third-floor windows, but the wife's silhouette was in none of them. Phoebe would be fuming, or tearful, or baffled, or reassessing our relationship. She had no inkling, and never would, of how lucky she was, of how she owed ongoing existence to the bare minutes by which Delacroix had arrived first. His demise at least served to suggest that reburying the piecemeal contraption did not get rid of previous intruders. Or did it suggest that my holdout of one measly spring made all the difference? And what if planting that single artifact with the rest made no difference except to render Phoebe and me utterly vulnerable?

Meanwhile, I must have been crazy to loiter this long by the "scene of the crime." The simple proximity of Delacroix's effects to my address was bad, and to be placed here by witnesses might circumstantially clinch my guilt. But dealing with this mother lode of incrimination was impossible till I clarified my status with Phoebe.

The apartment was devoid of any sign my wife had returned, apart from bedroom door, formerly open but now, no doubt, bolted against me. "Phoebe? Are you okay?" I called in vain, an inch from varnished paneling. "Can I come in? Can we talk?" In a couple of respects I was glad she didn't answer. The more she sulked, the more of an opportunity she allowed for detachment toward the fish to overtake her too. She'd also decide it was "just like me" to storm out for an hour, if she ever became aware of my absence.

The less she knew about my program of self-protection, the better. To save myself from wanton criminal prosecution, I elected to engage in flat-out criminal behavior. Rubber gloves were redeployed from under kitchen sink. On the porch I could discern no onlookers on sidewalks or in windows, and I dashed down, scooped up Delacroix's attire, and scrambled to his car. It was unlocked. His keys were in trouser hip pocket.

I cruised in low gear along the darkest side streets, meandering the quarter-mile to the road skirting the waterfront park. I'd avoided leaving fingerprints, but it was a poor anthropologist who'd downplay the difficulties in erasing all traces of my DNA. I also wanted to work fast and minimize chances of being seen. Or mugged.

The neocolonial Marston Boathouse and its marina surroundings gave way to the alluvial terrain of India Point Park. I pulled over. No one was around, but that could change in a heartbeat. To crank down the windows and just ditch the Impala, and let salt breeze air out my dander and other vestiges, made for much less spectacle than rolling a car down grassy slope into the bay. Plus, if fortune smiled, some foolhardy delinquents might swallow the bait of keys in the ignition, and then where might official vehicle fetch up in the morning?

The loosely knotted wad of Delacroix's belongings I flung past the outsized pegboard of rotten, stubby pilings into the clutches, if fortune kept smiling, of outbound tide. The afterthought of magenta rubber gloves followed suit.

I slunk homeward, gawking left and right on high alert for passersby to shun, and accompanied by a heckling awareness of my stupidity. Why hadn't I thought sooner that Delacroix must have logged tonight's itinerary somehow? Would I have done anything this dumb before the excavation of Tillinghast's mind-altering debris? Cops would come knocking, possibly before dawn, and though Phoebe might be none the wiser I'd ever gone out, she'd seen Delacroix's outfit, and her fine eye for detail would have absorbed telltale color and fabric.

I was screwed. I commenced to hyperventilate in anticipation of the third degree. How to protest my innocence? And of capitol offense, I was damn well innocent. No, I'd only taken what rash, cloddish steps I could to prevent entrapment by the legal system, though I'd thereby ensured the system had me hogtied. To my small comfort, the state had the burden of producing a body, and chances of that were negligible.

Suppose I stuffed a week's essentials into a rucksack, hopped a midnight bus, vacated the state? Then when more East Siders vanished, dozens of witnesses could testify I was in New York or Philly or wherever. Yes, that would be this sinking man's straw of choice. My feet picked up a more upbeat pace.

They carried me within three blocks of condos-cum-church where I'd almost been reduced to dirty laundry. The budget-minded owners of a nineteenth-century faux palazzo had enclosed their yard with plastic picket fence. Some extra color on a white corner post captured my attention and quashed my optimism. Streetlamps gleamed off a horde of tiny turquoise carapaces. I bent close enough to identify them as mites of freakishly star-shaped outline, a breeding population hundreds of times over, and whatever comprised their original diet, here they were feasting on plastic. The bottom several inches of the post had been ingested, and they were chewing madly on. It sounded like a thousand tiny dental drills.

Whether Tillinghast's machinery was under the soil had become irrelevant, as had fleeing town or defending my innocence in the long term. I had a gut-level pessimism that rebuilding the generator wouldn't help either, that enlisting the Engineering Department wouldn't have altered the consequences. Even if alien bugs didn't receive the same unnaturally bland reception as Houdini fish, they foreseeably spelled the collapse of modern culture. What the hell was my hurry? It was like racing toward the end of the world.

No squad cars were waiting by the house, a shallow consolation better than none. I should have savored it. I reentered quietly to sustain the illusion I'd never departed. Again, as with my entreaties that Phoebe take a cab, I needn't have bothered.

The door still stood between us, with no disorder to show for it if she had sallied out. "Phoebe?" No sound or syllable emerged. Was she speechless with wrath, or with the apathy that should have been setting in by now? I dragged in a dining room chair and sat elbows on knees, chin upon fists, studying the glass doorknob. If I twisted it, would the door be locked? If it were or not, would the wife caterwaul blue murder? Or would the silent treatment go on forever because there was nothing of her in the bedroom but a bunch of clothes on the shag scatter rug?

I could have lent her my protective neckwear, or culled another talisman for her from Stop & Shop bag. But I hadn't, and was I to blame for not thinking of that? Had my unconscious plotted to reinstate permanent bachelor quarters? I never used to agree with Freud that accidents never happened.

My eyes are now aching and bleary from watching the door. My ass has been numb for ages. I ought to pack according to plan or reconsider trying the doorknob. But I can't conceive of moving, which binds me like a vacuum seal. Human decisions will soon carry no weight in any case, and Houdini fish will inherit the earth. Or actually they won't, because turquoise mites will have eaten the soap dispensers.

When the cops finally do turn up, they're welcome to bust their way in. Until then, my wife might simply be in comunicado and nothing worse, and I might not be complicit in her death. And the longer I can dodge that complicity, the longer I can delay facing my role in the grander scheme of voracious chaos.

Dimply Dolly Doofy

DONALD R. BURLESON

Donald R. Burleson is the author of twenty-two books, including the short story collections Lemon Drops and Other Horrors, Four Shadowings, Beyond the Lamplight, and Wait for the Thunder, as well as four novels. His fiction has appeared in Twilight Zone, the Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Lore, Cemetery Dance, Inhuman, Deathrealm, Terminal Fright, and many other magazines, as well as in dozens of anthologies, most recently Black Wings, Dead But Dreaming 2, and Horror for the Holidays. He lives in Roswell, New Mexico, with his writer wife Mollie and five cats.

CINDY'S HEAD WAS ENSHROUDED IN A THICK GRAY mantle of fog. Only she could see it, though. It was her private nebula, a swirling mental miasma of her very own, a chemical stratocumulus layer born of methamphetamines and nurtured by habit. Truth to tell, her condition bordered on outright stupor, a cerebral smog-bank that promised any day now to ripen into coma.

For now, however, she thought only of the present moment, a purposeless kaleidoscope of sense impressions with a dash of delirium. Sitting at a ramshackle wooden table in a malodorous apartment in which cleanliness was not even a comic memory, she stirred a half-warmed bowl of soup, lifting her spoon languidly from time to time to take a sip, dimly aware at some point that among the chunks of mushroom, two rotten yellow-gray teeth were floating in the liquid. She fished them out and flung them across the room. When had they fallen out, anyhow? Well, that was meth-mouth for you. A laugh a minute.

The pot in which she had heated the soup lay overturned across from her on the table, and she picked it up and looked at her reflection in the greasy metal surface. Aside from the spaces left by missing teeth, her visage was marred only by bleary jaundiced eyes, a puffy nose clogged with mucus, and a lunar landscape of facial pustules the color and consistency of rancid mayonnaise. Her hair, such of it as she still possessed, hung in miserable muddy strands like a soiled mop, and her cheeks and neck were wrinkled into saurian folds like those of an especially ill-preserved hundred-year-old woman. Cindy was seventeen.

Well, what if her face had lost a bit of its charm, its blossom of youth, and what if her clothes smelled of urine, and what if her breath did have the aroma of raw sewage? Was that any reason why she should be crying? But no, wait, it wasn't she who was crying. It must be the baby, off in the other room. Cindy had forgotten about her.

Actually the baby didn't so much cry as moan, her usual low, lethargic moan that somehow seemed to fit her emotionless little round face with its muddled and incurious eyes. Looking at this wan face, one might almost have thought the child was brain damaged, and if she had been, it would have been a matter of small wonder.

Cindy faltered her way into the other room, retrieved the baby, and brought her back to the kitchen table, where she began spooning what was left of the mushroom soup into the tiny mouth. For possibly the second or third time, she wondered who the baby's father was—not that it much mattered, she supposed. It could have been Carl or Lester or Jimmy or Earl or any of a couple of dozen other guys, all meth-heads of course, since she didn't know anybody else. At times she hoped it wasn't Jimmy, since the chemical mix he liked to pump into his veins was an especially scary kind of brew. At least Cindy generally stuck to the plain-vanilla sort of meth lab, not putting anything into her body much more bizarre than kitchen cleansers and creosote and lithium battery innards. Jimmy, on the other hand, had always gone for the labs that used ingredients like lighter fluid, paint thinner, and silver polish, and he had forever been babbling that mystical-sounding drivel of his as well.

It had something to do with an ancient book his grandfather supposedly used to read to him from, about the Old Gods or some such nonsense. Jimmy always seemed to take it pretty seriously, even reciting some of what his grandfather had told him. *"Make strong the power in the blood,"* he had intoned, *"taking into yourself the mighty salts and fluids, and know the woman who has made her blood not unlike your own in strength, for then shall you bring forth a child who shall be an instrument in opening the gates for the return of the Old Gods. Many sacrifices needs must be made, and the child shall do much to bring them to pass."* Thinking about it now, Cindy emitted a wheezing and cheerless little laugh. What a load of crap. Anyway, if Jimmy was so damned smart, why had his friends found him stone-dead a couple of days ago, his entrails half putrefied and his face fallen in like a rotted pumpkin?

Cindy was too nearly rotted away herself these days to consider more than momentarily the probability that Jimmy's and her respective explorations into the chemical enhancements of life must have produced some pretty ponderable genetic changes, and that any baby of theirs was likely to have an uncommon genome. Cindy thought rather less about such matters than about her next snort of meth. One had to keep one's priorities straight.

She wasn't altogether unmindful of her baby, though. She could scarcely understand why she hadn't had an abortion, but now that she had the little

brat in tow, she needed to think of a good way to get rid of her without going to the slammer.

At some unconscious level her chemically bemused state of mind proved to be more resourceful than a lucid state might have been, even had she still been capable of having one. Somehow she found herself driving to the local mega-store with the baby beside her on the seat. She barely knew what she was about, but a sort of formless compulsion seemed to be drawing her toward a course of action.

Once she had parked the car, grabbed up the kid, and made her way into the huge store—passing the inevitable greeter, who in spite of himself wrinkled his face up in obvious disgust at seeing what looked like a girl-zombie carrying a baby—she gravitated toward the toys department, only now consciously realizing what it was she was going to do. She was groggily aware, on the way, of passing lighted trees and tinsel hangings and hearing the familiarly tedious strains of holiday music, so she gathered Christmas must be coming. Well, she thought, arriving among the tawdry shelves of plastic toys, she was about to give herself one fine Christmas present.

After wandering up and down the aisles for a while, peering at the contents of the shelves, she found what she needed. There, on one particular shelf a little below eye level, was a cardboard display box that bore the inscription DIMPLY DOLLY DOOFY and contained a rather lifelike baby doll with outstretched pudgy arms and legs and a piquant little face out of which blue plastic eyes stared giddily. This was just what Cindy had hoped to find. She looked up and down the aisle; nobody was watching.

Setting the real baby on the floor at her feet, she plucked the plastic doll out of the display box and tossed it, end over end, little rubbery arms and legs jiggling, into a rolling trash bin the cleanup staff had left unattended a few feet away. The doll settled with a quiet little puff of dust into the bottom of the bin, where dirty rags and paper towels collapsed around and over it. Cindy then retrieved the real baby off the floor and placed it in the display box, doing what she could to arrange the arms and legs to look like the pose of the original doll. As usual, the baby was so phlegmatic that it barely moved at all, showing no surprise in its impassive little face. It just sat there in the box, staring out as the doll had, almost as if it had done a quick study of the doll and followed its example.

“Well,” Cindy said, coughing and wiping her runny nose with the back of her hand, “at least now you have a name.” And she wandered off toward the store entrance, cheerfully leaving the baby to its own devices. Who knows, she thought, maybe when they find out it’s not a real Dimply Dolly Doofy, they’ll mark the price down. In any event, two weeks later Cindy would be dead of an overdose.

SHORTLY AFTER CINDY’S LEAVING THE STORE, TWO teenage boys stopped in front of the Dimply Dolly Doofy display. One of them poked the baby in the arm, and it emitted a sharp little cry. “Ow.”

“Hey,” the boy said to his friend, “that stuff feels like real skin. And it sounds like a real baby.”

The other boy laughed. “So I’ll buy it for you for Christmas. I know you’ve always wanted one, right?”

The first boy rolled his eyes and shook his head. “C’mon, let’s go grab something to eat.”

BEFORE LONG, MORE SERIOUS CUSTOMERS, PUSHING shopping carts, paused in front of the doll display, where the baby sat motionless and quiet as before.

The woman read aloud from the advertising copy on the display box. “‘Take Dimply Dolly Doofy home to love and care for. Feed her, hold her, hear her cry, dry her tears.’” She turned to her husband. “Tom, we’ve got to buy it. I think Marcia will love it.”

The husband took the box with the baby off the shelf and placed it in the cart. “Right you are.”

AFTER LITTLE MARCIA HAD GONE UP TO BED, MOMMY and Daddy worked at getting the Christmas tree ready for tomorrow morning. Presents were arrayed in profusion under the tree, and in the midst of them Dimply Dolly Doofy sat in her store display box, looking out upon the magnificence of tinsel and wrapping paper with eyes that evinced no reaction. Her time on the toy shelf at the store had taught her to be very, very quiet.

“Amazing how real-looking they make those things now,” the father said, pointing at the baby. “You know, you’ll laugh at me, but I could almost

swear I saw the thing move a minute ago.”

The mother patted him on the cheek. “That’s how things look sometimes, my dear, after three Scotch-and-sodas.”

He shrugged, grinning. “The answer to that is, have another one. Join me?”

“Okay,” she said, “but then I think we’d better turn in. I have an idea a certain little girl is going to be getting up pretty early.”

They had their drink and climbed the stairs, leaving the living room in darkness except for the pale glow of the Christmas tree lights.

Finally, then, after waiting and listening some little while to be sure they were all asleep in their beds up there, Dimply Dolly Doofy stretched her chubby little arms and legs and heaved a sigh. There was no hurry. At length she pushed herself out of the display box and began crawling, first over the mounds of wrapped presents under the tree, then slowly across the carpet. All was quiet. Feeling a remarkable strength in her little frame, she began her patient way up the stairs. When she had reached the top and crawled up onto the upstairs hallway floor, she craned her tiny neck to look up at the receding bedroom doorways, then inched toward the nearest one.

She had things to do.

IT WAS THE GRANDMOTHER WHO FOUND THEM ALL in the morning, coming over as she always did on these occasions to help with the holiday breakfast. What she found when she called, and had no answer and went upstairs, was unspeakable horror in the beds—three throats torn out, three bodies savagely chewed and nearly drained of blood. Whatever had dined on the blood and the flesh had vomited chunky gobbets of the stuff here and there, apparently to make room to eat more.

The sacrifices had begun.

THEY SAY NOW ON THE STREET THAT WINOS AND BAG ladies sometimes see an odd little form, foraging through garbage bins or scuttering out of sight around corners and down dark alleys. Once two street people sleeping in the rear doorway of a laundromat woke to see a grinning baby sitting in the space near them, and one of them managed to get up and stumble away while the tiny form reached out and parted the throat of the other man.

Now the scattered reports of grim and unaccountable deaths seem the most prominent around All Hallows' Eve and Walpurgis Night, but one can never really tell when and where they may occur. Whether some cosmic cycle of sacrifice and prophecy has tumbled into motion, no one can say for sure.

But somewhere in the night, in the restless dark, two little eyes glow with a fever and a nameless nest of secrets all their own.

The Hag Stone

RICHARD GAVIN

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PAMELA HAD BEEN BORN TOO LATE. HAD SHE BEEN the product of a distant era, she might have viewed the conditions of that night—pyres blazing where the cold lake shored pale sands, the endless effusion of wine, the shouting, the music—as ceremonious; an Arcadian revel; a spirit-call spelled out in an alphabet of laughter and stifled lust. But she was a child of her age, and so to her this scene was merely a beach party in late spring—an event she seemed only too happy to stray from.

Although I was also a product of my time, I somehow *did* know that the night was auspicious. Not because of the bonfires or the drink, but because I knew Fate had delivered me to that ruckus in order to show me my future. And see my future I did, the very moment I spotted Pamela.

She was a stranger to me at the time, but the glimpse of her I'd chanced when the crowd shifted was enough to prove that all those age-old notions of first-sight love were not mere literary tropes.

My sighting of her came swiftly and, to my horror, seemed to be ending equally fast.

Through the haze of the fire's heat and the ever-milling crowd I watched her rise from the log where she'd been seated and saunter off into the darkness.

What inspired me to toss my drink aside and follow her was not lust, but panic that the Fate that had presented this woman to me might also dissolve her like a mirage. I wormed my way out of the crowd, relieved that I was still able to discern the peacock-like pattern of her skirt billowing like vibrant plumage in the night.

She settled at the base of a birch tree. I stopped pursuing, realizing that I was running the risk of frightening her. I wanted our initial meeting to be perfect, so I stood scrambling for something to say. It didn't need to be witty, but I couldn't let it be foolish.

Pamela plucked a bit of driftwood from the rocks and began to poke stippling patterns in the sand.

"Is everything okay?" My first words to her. They spilled out almost unexpectedly, but they would have to do. Pamela seemed more confused than heartened by my concern. She told me she was fine.

"Crowd getting to be a bit much?" I asked.

“I guess you could say that.”

“Well, I can’t blame you for wanting to get away. I’m not much for parties myself.” I advanced a step and extended my hand. “My name’s Mason, by the way.”

She set down the stick and filled my hand with hers. It was warm and delicate, like the petal of a hothouse flower. “Pamela,” she said.

“Mind if I join you, Pamela?”

And so it began.

I settled beside her in a nook where neither the stars nor the bonfires could light. I talked to her and I listened to her. Our conversation was for me so uncharacteristically natural that it almost seemed scripted, as if she and I were actors who’d been preparing for this scene our entire lives. We delivered every line with organic ease.

Being twenty at the time, I was just old enough to have accumulated all sorts of tensions over the opposite sex. But that night they lost their hold on me. Everything about our meeting was... apt.

We erected a tiny Chichen-Itza out of beach stones—an emblem of what we were building between us, one stone at a time.

It was this activity that led to Pamela’s discovery of the stone that would forever change our lives.

The rock had been interred in a shallow grave of sand. Pamela had freed it only after we’d used up all the stones that were lying on the surface. When she noticed that the flat rock had a hole bored through its center, she gasped a little.

She told me such stones were often known as hag stones, that they were auspicious and believed by some to be magical. The discovery of them was a rare blessing. The finder, she explained, could peer through the hole in the stone and see into the spirit realm.

“Is that so? I said. “Well then, it looks like you’ve been blessed tonight.”

Pamela smiled and told me that she could have told me that already. I loved hearing her say that.

“Should we try it out?” I suggested. Pamela seemed reluctant. “What? Is using a hag stone considered bad luck or something?”

“No,” she returned, “it’s not that. I just get a little nervous playing around with things like this.”

“Who says we’re playing? We’re just seeing if it works.”

The hesitation in her gestures was noticeable, but eventually Pamela did lift the stone to her eye. After a few seconds she switched to the other eye before finally shrugging and slipping the hag stone into the pocket of her skirt.

“Didn’t work?” I asked.

“Maybe I’m not doing it right,” she said, smiling.

After a while we took notice of the fact that many of the revelers had fled the beach. The bonfires had sunk down to heaps of jewel-like embers, and the deepening night was growing cold.

We eventually found our way back to Pamela’s tiny apartment for tea.

We found our way to her bed with the same effortless manner. Our lovemaking was a seamless extension of our meeting just hours earlier.

There was such ease and simple joy in those early days that we both accepted that we’d been destined to be together. Time rolled on, and although Pamela and I were not immune to the customary trials and hardships of any relationship, that sense of cosmic determinism never faded. It may have occasionally gotten silted in beneath overdue bills or term papers, but it was our rock.

Ironically, this belief in hidden forces, however beneficent, was also our undoing.

I used to chide Pamela that the only reason she was pursuing a degree in archaeology was because she wanted to dig up people who had been as superstitious as she was. She always preferred to call it her “spiritual side,” but it was this aspect of her personality that led her to sleeping with the hag stone under her pillow. She’d been inspired to undertake this practice by, of all people, H. P. Lovecraft.

Down the road from our little apartment was an occult shop called New Aeon Books. Every so often we’d stop in, usually just to browse, though occasionally Pamela would come across a charm or paperback book that piqued her “spiritual side” enough to sacrifice whatever pin money we had that week. One night after dinner at a cheap noodle house we made a quick detour into New Aeon, though only to escape the rain.

We stumbled into the store, wet as sewer rats, and giggling loudly. We hadn’t noticed that the shop’s lights had been dimmed, or that a small cluster of people had congregated at the rear of the store.

The rotund man stationed at the plywood podium looked at us with displeasure. Pamela and I stifled our laughter. I pushed my soaked hair off my face and nodded apologetically. I wondered if the pressure of speaking publicly, even to an audience of seven, was too much for him, for his hairless cranium was glistening with perspiration.

Next to the podium, an easel-braced poster advertised the subject of his presentation: *H. P. Lovecraft: Sorcerer of Starry Wisdom*. Beneath the title, which had been printed in a suitably mysterious-looking font, was a large black-and-white photograph of a man I presumed was Lovecraft. The austerity of his clothing and his expression was contrasted by the distant stare of his black eyes. The poster's background was a tangle of glowing tentacles and ugly stars.

Pamela took my arm and led me to a pair of vacant folding chairs. I muttered something about not wanting to stay. She whispered that we'd already been rude enough for one night. The presenter cleared his throat loudly, which caused the fold of flesh beneath his chin to flap like a turkey's wattle.

"Just to recap quickly for our recent arrivals," he began, "I was just asked about evidence that supports my theory of Lovecraft being as much a magician as an author of weird tales.

"While it's true that Lovecraft always declared himself a scientific materialist, many of his letters, his accounts of his dreams, and of course his fiction combine to paint a very different picture of the man."

He held up a manila folder. "This is a dossier I've been compiling for the past nine years. It includes all sorts of marginalia that hints at Lovecraft's practices and philosophical theories which I would classify as magic or sorcery. One perfect example is HPL's visit to the Dutch Reformed Church cemetery in Brooklyn.

"There Lovecraft actually chipped a piece off of one of the headstones and took it home with him. In a letter dated September 16, 1922, he writes of this ghoulish keepsake, saying, and I quote, '*I must place it beneath my pillow while I sleep. Who can say what thing might come out of the centuried earth to exact vengeance for its desecrated tomb? And should it come, who can say what it might resemble?*' End quote.

"Fans will recognize this very scenario as the plot of Lovecraft's tale 'The Hound.' It seems quite obvious that he did indeed undertake this form

of dream ritual, and what he saw was later ciphered in one of his short stories...”

I leaned in and pleaded quietly to Pamela, “Can we *please* leave?” She nodded. We preferred to brave the rain.

Drying off in our washroom later that night, Pamela said. “I’d like to try that.”

“What?”

“What Lovecraft did: place a special stone under my pillow and see if it affects my dreams.”

“Should I pencil in a little grave-robbing for Friday night?”

“No, dummy,” she replied before marching down the hall. I watched her fishing about in her dresser until she freed the tiny rosewood box in which she kept her most cherished possessions: her grandmother’s hatpin that she’d loved as a young girl, little notes I’d left for her around the apartment, old birthday cards, and...

I didn’t even have to look at what Pamela had resting in her palm when she returned to the bathroom.

“I want to use this.” She kissed the hag stone the way a priest would his holy stole. “I think it will bring fantastic dreams.”

SOMETIME BEFORE DAWN I WAS AWOKEN BY PAMELA tossing and turning. My eyes still half-closed, I reached for her, hoping to ease her troubled sleep. Her body was warm beneath the covers. I could feel her chest rising and falling.

Muffled sounds, like cat claws raking upholstery, filled the darkness.

The pillow was heaving and shifting like choppy waters beneath Pamela’s head. It was as if a small animal had been pinned beneath her and was frantically trying to free itself. Pamela moaned distantly.

I called Pamela’s name. I shook her. Her face remained a placid mask conveying the deepest slumber.

Sucking in a breath as though it would bolster me for the task ahead, I grasped the pillow and yanked it out from under her.

Her eyes sprung open. She let out a loud, desperate, wheezing gasp. Pressing her hand to her chest, she rolled out of bed and thudded down on the floor where she began to cough and retch.

The hag stone was like a gray island in a sea of white cotton.

I leapt to Pamela, who was still struggling to breathe. Frantically I tried to check if she was choking, but she rose and stumbled out of the room, collapsing in the corridor. I did my best to comfort her until her breathing returned to normal.

I examined her for wounds or bruises, still unsure of what exactly had occurred. I got her a glass of water and asked her if she could tell me anything about what had happened. Pamela shook her head.

I made a quick detour to the bedroom where the hag stone was reposing like a blood-plumped leech on the mattress. Not wanting to touch it, I wrapped my hand in Pamela's empty pillowcase and flung the rock into the waste basket.

I made Pamela some tea and settled onto the sofa with her. We stayed up for the remainder of the night. She spoke very little, except to confess to having a headache. I got her an aspirin and rubbed her temples until she finally dozed off.

I let Pamela sleep until past noon before I finally nudged her awake.

"Do you remember anything more about last night?" I asked.

"I remember dreaming," she said through a yawn. "It wasn't anything remarkable, through. I dreamt that I was sitting on a rocking chair inside an ordinary suburban house. I could see the other houses through the big picture window in the living room. It was postcard suburbia: manicured lawns, station wagons in the driveways, painted mailboxes, the whole thing. While I was standing there watching kids running up and down the sidewalks and playing games, the dream began to change. I began to hear a low whistling sound..."

Her shudder was noticeable. Before I could even move to comfort her she wrapped her arms around herself.

"There was this... shape... near me. I couldn't see it, but I was suddenly sick with the feeling of being watched. The feeling just kept building. Pretty soon I was so frightened that I couldn't even bear the thought of turning around to face what was watching me."

She pressed her hands against her face.

"It's okay," I assured her, "it was just a dream."

"No!" she spat. "No, it wasn't. I need to tell you this. I only caught a quick glance of the thing. It had no face at all, just a smudge of gray with an oval mouth. I think that mouth was causing the awful whistling. But worse

than the faceless thing or the awful noise was the fact that I somehow knew this figure wasn't part of my dream."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it was *outside* my dream. It was *near* my dream but wasn't a part of it. It was like a stagehand standing in the wings while the play is happening onstage.

"Knowing that the shape was near the dream but not in it was what turned my dream into a nightmare. I suddenly knew that the house I was in and the street I was looking at weren't permanent, weren't true. There was a limit to how real they could be. The edges of my world became visible to me. And this thing, this entity, was lurking right on the threshold where my dream lost its imagery and it became... I don't know what... a great void."

I swallowed and felt pain. My throat had dried out completely. "That's a disturbing dream, hon. I completely understand why it upset you. But it was just a dream, right?"

Pamela just stared at me. Though she said not a word about it, my well-intentioned dismissal of her vision had obviously cut her deeply. Try as I did to make amends by cooking a dinner of comfort food and sitting with her to watch sitcoms (without laughing at any of them) for the evening, I had broken my lover's faith in me. Our relationship never recovered.

WE WENT TO BED EARLY THAT NIGHT.

It was still dark when she woke me by digging her nails into my bicep. She was whimpering like a wounded pup.

I rolled over, sat up. "What's wrong, Pam? What is it?"

"It's here. It's watching us..."

Her strangled words didn't really register, but what did affect me was Pamela's face. It was ashen, and the eyes were so wide they seemed lidless.

Wordlessly Pamela pointed to the corner of our room. It was then that the terror seized me. I'm unsure what awful form I sensed was glaring at us from the edge of our room, but whatever it was, I knew I didn't want to see it.

There, where the moonbeams seemed to have swept up all the blackness it could not banish, Pamela's antique desk appeared as a chunk of carved coal. The shade of the standing lamp glowed bone-bright amidst the

shadows. It was all I could do to keep my imagination from decorating that white bell of fabric with eyes and a wide whistling mouth.

The wind pressed sharply against our windows, sounding too much like shallow heaving. My imagination latched a breathing rhythm onto this. It also coaxed the darkness in the corner into the shape of an intruder lanky enough to disguise itself in the seam where wall met wall.

Pamela hissed into my ear, *"You see it, don't you?"*

I told her I didn't see anything. It was not a lie. Not totally. What I saw was not complete, only the mere suggestion of the corner wobbling, as though the marriage of walls was as shaky as a pair of curtains being clutched shut by a nervous hand.

"It knows we've seen it!"

Pamela's cry was the final straw for me. I overcame my fear by leaping from the bed and smacking the light switch on the wall.

When the naked bulb burst to life, the details of the room fell dutifully into place.

"We have to get rid of it!" Pamela exclaimed, flinging back the sheets. She began to search the room frantically, first by rummaging through her dresser drawers. "Where is it?"

When I didn't answer immediately, she shouted, "The hag stone, what did you do with it?"

"I threw it out."

Pamela moved to the trash can beside her desk, dumped out its contents. The stone thumped onto the carpet.

"Oh, God..." Pamela placed a hand over mouth as though she was about to retch. She flung the stone at me. I cried out when it struck my shin. "It's gone!"

"What are you talking about? You just about broke my fucking leg with it!"

"Look at it!" she cried. "Just look at it!"

I did, but only to appease her. If there was an explanation for the change, it was evading me superbly. Ultimately I just picked up the hag stone, carried it out to our balcony, and flung it as far as I could.

Pamela was standing in the hallway when I re-entered the apartment. "What happened to it, Mason?" I moved past her and went back to bed,

pretending that I was sleepy, making believe that I wasn't as frightened as she was. "Mason, where did the seeing-hole go?"

THE LAST THING I WANTED TO DO WAS GO TO WORK, but I had no sick-day benefits and we couldn't afford the loss of a day's wages. Before I left that morning Pamela muttered that she wasn't going to class, which I thought was a good idea. I told her I would phone to check in on her and would be home straight after my shift.

I called the apartment on my lunch break, but the phone rang lonely. It worried me, and by mid-afternoon that unease had twisted into panic.

The homeward drive couldn't end too quickly, and when I finally reached the last flight of stairs leading to our apartment, an instinctual sense of dread seized me. I didn't know what I was going to see beyond our door. I only hoped I would be able to cope with it.

Pushing the unlocked door back from its frame revealed the fallout of Pamela's day of solitude.

Our apartment had been ravaged from ceiling to floor. Every stick of furniture had been upset or smashed or had its upholstery shorn from its frame. The wallpaper had been stripped and the plaster behind it punctured by what looked to be the careless lashes of a hammer. The windows, perplexingly, remained intact, though thick sections of taped newspaper rendered their panes opaque.

The image of Pamela's body lying lifeless on the floor petrified me. The vision was so vivid that I couldn't bring myself to take another step into the living room.

Only the sharp scratching sounds, indicative of something living, managed to move me at all—and even then only to turn my head.

Pamela was hunched like a feral child against one wall. Her nightgown was torn and filthy; her matted hair was flecked with pallor-pale wall plaster.

"It shifted," she said. She was practically giggling, perhaps at the absurdity of it all, or from her own exhaustion. "I've been trying to find it, but it just keeps moving..."

I went to her, took her face in my hands. "What's happened? Who did this to you?"

She clasped her hand over my mouth, pressed her finger against her own lips. “It’s watching us. It’s found a new place.”

“What has?”

“The seeing-hole... I know it’s here, but I *can’t* find it!”

I did the only thing that felt proper: I removed Pamela from the nest of her torment. Without bothering to pack a bag, I took Pamela to a motel by the beach strip.

Our room looked better suited for a hospital in-patient than for a tourist. The stone floor was barely hidden beneath patches of tacky linoleum, the walls were paneled in bowing wood. The whole place stank of bleach. The sad thing was, even these paltry accommodations were an extravagance we could not afford. I had to use part of our weekly grocery money to pay for it and the sandwich fixings I’d bought us for dinner.

I had hoped that foreign surroundings would not only calm Pamela but also allow me to see the situation more clearly. But our grungy hideaway neither refreshed my perspective nor put an end to Pamela’s panic. She pushed one of the plastic chairs into a corner, giving herself a perch where she could twitch and scrutinize the air, her hands, the clothes on her back. She was like a squirrel with ever-taut nerves and a relentless panic over unseen perils. The ham sandwich and carton of milk I set on the table beside her went untouched.

I waited up with her for as long as I could. I pictured her nerves as being like violin strings being tightened and tightened. I was waiting for them to snap. But Pamela never reached critical mass. As the hours moved glacially past, she seemed to be, if not calmer, then at least at a peculiar peace with her current state of mind.

I don’t remember dozing off, but I must have, for the next thing I can recall is a hand gently nudging my shoulder. I opened my eyes to see Pamela standing in the filmy light of dawn.

“It’s not following me anymore,” she whispered.

I wish I could have been more relieved by Pamela’s freshly stoic demeanor, but on some level I sensed that we were both merely enjoying the eye of the storm, and that the worst of it was just on the horizon, waiting for the prime moment to blast our lives apart.

It waited less than a week before it struck.

The days leading up to that final awfulness were routine enough to plant a seed of hope in me. I still wasn't convinced that Pamela was one-hundred percent, but her familiar behavior did lead me to believe that in time she would be.

“**W**ILL YOU ANSWER ME SOMETHING?” I'D ASKED HER one temperate evening. The breeze that pushed through the half-open window smelled rarely fresh for the heart of the city. Pamela and I were lying in post-coital bliss. I was too relaxed and had assumed that the drama was a dark speck in our rearview; a harmless memory.

“Sure, why not?”

“That morning when we were at the motel, you said ‘it's not following me anymore.’ What did you mean?”

She sat up and turned from me. The sheets twisted over her naked back like a bridal train. I touched my fingertips to her side. She flinched as though I'd burned her.

“I'm sorry,” I said, and it was true. “I was just curious, but it doesn't matter.”

“The seeing-hole...”

“What?”

“The seeing-hole from the stone. That's what was following me.”

I regretted raising the issue.

“And I never said it was gone,” she added. “I said it was no longer following me.”

“Are you saying you still believe this... magical seeing-hole or whatever you think it is, is still here?”

She reached over and took my hand. As she raised it to her face, I was half expecting her to suck on one of my fingers—an erotic little game we both enjoyed. Pamela selected my index finger, but instead of sliding it into her mouth she pressed it against the lid of her closed eyes. “Right here.”

I snapped my hand back, staring at the fingers that had touched Pamela's waxy eyelid and had felt the shaped jelly beneath it.

I shifted away, unsure of what to say. Pamela remained in the same supine posture on the sofa. Finally, when I rose to get myself a glass of water, she announced that she was going to take a shower.

“Good idea,” I muttered. “I'll see about fixing us something for dinner.”

I entered the kitchen and began a pantomime of preparing a meal. After plunking a frying pan upon the oven range, I stood dumbly, listening to the faint rumble of the shower running down the hall.

And then the scream.

I tore down the hall and into the bathroom. Through the shower curtain she appeared a vague heap at one end of the tub. I pulled the wet plastic back. Pamela was trembling, despite the gush of steaming water. Her left hand was pressed against the tiled stall; her right groped the air before her.

“I can’t see!” She shrieked the words again and again. Her tone moved from enraged to bewildered to petrified; but always, “I can’t see!”

I hunched down and took her and held her like a child. We remained there, both of us crying until the water sprayed cold over us.

In reality, less than twenty minutes had elapsed between Pamela’s scream and the time I ushered her through the emergency room doors. But by then Pamela was catatonic. I did all the talking, giving what little information I could to the nurse at the registration desk and eventually to the doctor.

The tests they ran turned up nothing. Pamela’s eyes responded regularly to all the introduced stimuli. In the end they suggested that hers was a hysterical blindness. The doctor assured me that her condition was legitimate, but unquestionably psychosomatic.

At his suggestion, I consented to have Pamela admitted for a seventy-two-hour psychiatric observation. Pamela begged me not to do it. Her pleading ended only after the Haldol took hold.

It was well into the morning by the time I left the hospital. I was so exhausted that my blood felt like toxic sludge in my veins. Everything around me seemed to be swaying. The irony was that, despite my body’s cries to the contrary, I knew that sleep was impossible. Pamela’s condition had chewed through my own resourcefulness and logic, and it appeared that the agents of science at the hospital weren’t holding out much hope for solving the riddle, or at least not after a mere three-day observation.

Resources tapped, I resigned to broadening my reach for anything that could pass for an answer. I had only one option in mind. Off I went to the local witch-doctor.

T WAS FORTUNATE FOR ME THAT NEW AEON BOOKS kept hours that were as unconventional as its inventory. Unlike the night of my and Pamela’s fateful

first visit, that morning the store was virtually vacated. The few browsers had their features hazed by the bright sun pouring through the shop's dirty windows. A rodent-featured man stood by the cash register, his cigarette hovering before an ashtray that was in dire need of emptying.

He looked surprised when I approached.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"I hope so. A few months ago my fiancée and I attended an event here. It was a talk on H. P. Lovecraft."

"Which one?" The chortle that followed his question irked me.

"What?"

"I said which one. Stanley's probably given seven or eight talks on that guy."

"Stanley? That's the man who was lecturing that night? Bigger fellow, receding hair?"

"I wouldn't give that flattering description too loudly," the man replied. "He'll hear you."

"Stanley's here?"

The man juted his thumb toward a far corner of the shop. "Stanley's always here."

I moved toward the man in the stacks. His sizeable frame was made shapeless by the rumpled London Fog coat that draped it. The hairless dome of his cranium was once again a fountain of perspiration.

"Excuse me? Stanley?"

"Who wants to know?" he returned. I didn't catch the title of the book he was clumsily shoving back onto the shelf, but can only assume it was something he was embarrassed by. "I was doing research," he added defensively.

"My name is Mason Day. I saw one of your Lovecraft lectures here."

"Yes?"

"I... need your help."

My plea seemed to soften Stanley's demeanor. A look of authentic concern claimed his face. I told him about how Pamela had followed Lovecraft's suggestion of sleeping with a stone under her head, and although I omitted the details about just how severely Pamela had been impacted, I made sure that Stanley knew the situation was dire.

“I feel for you, Mason. I really do. But unfortunately I don’t really see how I can help.”

“Well, have you ever heard of anything like this happening before? I mean, did Lovecraft ever suffer after sleeping with that bit of gravestone under his pillow?”

“HPL never mentioned anything to that effect. For what it’s worth, I’m of the opinion that whatever forces he contacted through that practice significantly augmented his imagination.”

“So you believe that this kind of little ritual, or whatever you want to call it, can do as much good as harm?”

He moved his thick hands in a noncommittal gesture. “It’s difficult to say. I’m afraid you’re riding the razor’s edge here. On one hand, your fiancée is clearly in a bad state. But on the other hand, her magic is working. Now, I’m not trivializing your fiancée’s predicament, believe me. But what she’s experiencing—the feeling that everything around her is aware and is watching—is not *necessarily* an indication that she’s mentally ill. There’s a long, long line of individuals throughout history who spoke of this deeper reality.

“The poet William Blake had an experience very similar to your fiancée’s. He was sitting in his garden one idyllic afternoon when, without warning, he was suddenly overcome by the realization that every flower, every blade of grass, every weed, was sentient. He described it as all Nature becoming plumes of a peacock—a vibrant collection of eyes watching him. The spirits made themselves known to Blake. Perhaps they’re doing the same with your fiancée.”

“No,” I said with more than a little stubbornness. “This is all in her head.”

“Or the spirits are,” Stanley returned.

In my exhausted state, I was unable to scrounge up a retort, so I exited New Aeon without comment.

THE TRIO OF DAYS THAT STOOD BETWEEN PAMELA’S admittance and subsequent release were excruciating for me. For Pamela, I would imagine they were unspeakable. I visited her twice, but both times she didn’t exhibit the faintest awareness of my shadow at her bedside, of my hand closing over hers, of my voice whispering hollow consolations.

The blindness had not lifted, though the specialist I spoke to assured me that such a sudden recovery was incredibly rare. Her optic nerves were in perfect condition, and the doctor assured me that she would see again, in time. Her referral was not to an optometrist, but a psychotherapist.

“Your fiancée’s problem is rooted somewhere in mind, Mr. Day,” the doctor had assured me. “Ascertaining the root issue is the first step toward her recovery. Her affliction is real, even if its cause is not immediately physically apparent. After all, just because we cannot see a problem’s source doesn’t make the problem any less real.”

I wish she hadn’t ended on that tone.

Pamela didn’t say a word during the ride home, nor during the slow ascent to our apartment, guided as she was by my hand.

When we entered the living room, Pamela exhibited her wish to lie down by stumbling her way toward the bedroom. I swept to her side and made the rest of her journey a less bumpy one. She lowered herself onto the mattress, her legs stiff, her arms at her side. I looked into her open eyes. Their sightless gaze was affixed on the ceiling. The blindness had taken none of their rich citrine-brown coloring.

I wondered what time-bomb could have been ticking away inside her. This question led to others, even uglier. I wondered how well I had really known this woman, my fiancée, this stranger on the bed.

Or maybe there was no deep Freudian tumor. Maybe it was all just the spirits that bled in through the hag stone...

With care, I removed Pamela’s shoes before exiting the room.

I prepared a makeshift bed for myself on the sofa. Every few minutes I got up to check on Pamela.

The late show was airing *Suddenly, Last Summer*, a film I’d never seen. I hoped it would be dull enough to bore me into slumber. Instead it infected me, wreaked havoc with the delicate state between wakefulness and sleep where I spent most of the night. In the dream, if dream it can be called, Pamela had assumed the Elizabeth Taylor role. She was the bedlam-confined victim. The girl with the abominable secret, the one everyone wanted confined or cured by the lobotomizing scalpel. I envisioned myself as Montgomery Clift’s character: the sympathetic doctor whose staunch ethics might have saved the girl.

But my subconscious mangled Williams's play into pure Grand Guignol. Though I hadn't wanted to do it, in the dream I stood idly by while gruff nurses tightened straps across Pamela's forehead and jaw, tethering her to a vivisectionist's table. I moved upon her, bearing something that resembled a corkscrew.

Pamela did not utter a sound while I blinded her with tools of crooked steel.

I awoke with a strangled cry. I hoped I hadn't woken Pamela. Light the blue of livid flesh poured from the snowy pattern on the TV. I rose to switch it off, and that's when I caught sight of the figure in the hallway.

My cry wasn't strangled this time. "Jesus Christ, Pam!" I was almost laughing with relief over her familiar silhouette in the doorway. "You scared the hell out of me!"

I heard her... heard the four words that trailed through the room like stale cigarette smoke. I knew what Pamela had said, but still, I said, "What?"

"I can see now," she repeated.

She stepped forward, into the ghost light from the dead channel.

I could see then too; see the pair of dull gray stones that stared out from Pamela's mask-slack face. They resembled a pair of greyed eggs being birthed from the bloodied sockets. I could see them pulsing and squirming. I could see them seeing me.

"I can see... *everything*," Pamela hissed. "I'm scared, Mason. Nothing's solid anymore... everything's... opening up... like flowers.

"We're not alone here, Mason... please..."

Her hands were groping for me, or perhaps swatting away whatever phantoms the stones in her eye sockets were now witnessing.

"... please... help me..."

She tumbled over the coffee table. I stepped back from her crumpled frame. Pamela was whimpering like an animal.

I ran.

Why elaborate on the horror of seeing Pamela with the eyes of a Catholic statue? Why puff up a smokescreen to make my actions seem excusable? They were not. In the face of true adversity, pure crisis, I fled.

The apartment stairs, the lobby, the streets—they all passed by in a stone-gray smudge. I found my way to Wicker Park and slumped down on a vacant bench.

The sodium lamp above made me feel as though I was in an interrogation room. I sat shivering, watching drunks and lovers milling about the footpaths and the manicured hills.

I'm not sure what finally led me to go back. Perhaps it was the cold tide of foreboding that was rising within me; the hopeless realization that my life had been irrevocably altered.

She was piled in one corner of the bedroom, beside the battered wingback chair where she liked to knit on winter Sundays. The carpet bag where she kept her yarn was lying in the blackish pool by her fist. She'd used one of her needles. It was still jutting from the crudely hollowed socket.

THE DOCUMENTATION FROM PAMELA'S STINT IN THE hospital went a long way to support the coroner's conclusion of suicide. Her funeral was sparsely attended. I sublet my way out of our lease and moved to another city.

I try not to think about Pamela anymore. It's one of the many things I like keeping to the past. Yet I have compulsions that keep me going back to her.

For example, no matter the season, I pay regular evening visits to the beach. I go there to dig for stones. To date I have found three that Pamela would have classified as hag stones, their holes as vacant as bored-out eye sockets.

Each time I've found one, the routine is always the same. I always thrill to the discovery, always fancy that Pamela is somehow straining to see me from the far side of the hag stone. I'm invariably tempted to peer through it and finally see what my dead fiancée saw.

I always stop when the stone is only halfway to my eye. Then I toss it into the sea.

My apartment is small but cosy. For months I kept waiting for my guilt and grief to rear up in the form of nightmares, but they never came. My sleep is always dreamless, no vision at all.

But sometimes there is sound: a low, beckoning whistle, like wind through an old tunnel. I wonder if I'm living in that great void that lurked at the threshold of Pamela's dream. Maybe the blackness I see when I slumber is a vision after all: the image of the desert of nothingness that keeps me on one end and my beloved on some far unreachable shore.

Underneath an Arkham Moon

JESSICA AMANDA SALMONSON AND W. H. PUGMIRE

(To the memory of Robert Bloch)

Jessica Amanda Salmonson is the author of The Deep Museum: Ghost Stories of a Melancholiac, Ou Lu Khen and the Beautiful Madwoman, Anthony Shriek, A Silver Thread of Madness, The Swordswoman, Mr. Monkey and Other Sumerian Fables, The Garments of Shekhinah, The Eleventh Jaguarundi and Other Mysterious Persons, and the Tomoe Gozen saga. She is a vegetarian, gardener, mystic, and curmudgeon.

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Our lives are not measured in years. They're not measured in achievement. Our lives are measured in nightmares and sorrows.

THE COMMONPLACE BOOK OF HENRY ANTHONY WILCOX

“**I**BEG THEE,” SAID AMBROSE TEASINGLY. “LET ME touch Mehme.”

“No. She’s sleeping.”

“I’ve a right!” he said petulantly. “I’m her cousin!”

“Leave her be,” said I, and tied the collar of my cape more tightly about my throat. Ambrose was a pretty thing, considering; in profile he might have been a Pre-Raphaelite maiden, though the long dark silken hair was wispy and thin.

We sat in September’s fading twilight. Seventeenth-century tombs slumbered beneath patrician trees. The low ossuary on which we rested provided sufficient comfort. There was no wind, yet slender branches of a giant willow moved subtly, sinuously, in the gathering dusk, elongated leaves whispering secrets of many who have passed beneath the sod.

This tree stood in the center of the cemetery. Its ancient trunk engulfed a weathered, illegible slab. Long ago the stone had borne a cultic symbol, round as the moon, with one crater gazing. I leaned and nudged Ambrose while concocting a fantastic remark about the spectral nourishment such rugged roots must suck from the charnel earth, and my barefooted companion laughed.

“That’s exactly why I come here,” Ambrose sighed, as he etched the earth with the middle toe of his right foot, the while balancing a foreboding tome on his left knee. He had the aspect of an aristocratic dandy and might have disguised himself to succeed in any corner of the world but for shoulders even more narrow than could be explained by his lack of arms. He required no sleeves, and an opening only for the left shoulder from which protruded but two fingers, fingers that were like the antennae of an outsized insect.

He continued as if reading a poem from his book: “I suck the debris of dream that leaked beneath this ground from out the chilling brains of the dead. Those brains have rotted into dust, but dreams can never dim. They call to our witch-blood. They seep upward from out the sod, into our chalk flesh, burrowing within our skulls. They need only the occult persuasion of those of us who can intuit their presence and existence.”

He had finished the etching in the earth, and pointing with a finger-like toe told me, “You see here, this emblem that I am copying from your gift of

this priceless book, *De Vermis Mysteriis*? Should you decide to sink onto your knees and nuzzle that sigil you will taste such secrets of the worm as you have never known.”

I sensed him turn to look at me. I thought him in fine spirit, but his moods were never stable. He looked angry as he spat.

“But why do I bother with loquacity, when you so completely ignore my ruminations? You’ve been away from Arkham for so long a time. I would have thought you’d enjoy drinking in her corrupted ambience, her elixir of things past, such as I, her oracle, possess. Do you still find my mental processes more ridiculous than profound? I dislike being treated with indifference; better just to say you find me foolish than to look away in silence. Ah, I could kill you if you weren’t the first one that I loved; even a man such as I has an ego. What on earth are you staring at?”

In truth I did find him absurd, and what’s worse, predictable; but at the same time he represented safety, as beneath his “posturing in purple” was a nurturing spirit. I had returned to Arkham from the “real” world with fewer victories than I expected. I had been defeated, I of noble blood, noble of its kind. I needed Ambrose’s familiarity, even that part of him that could slip from poetry to venom in a single heartbeat.

So I smiled at his momentary anger. I sighed before giving him reply. “What indeed,” said I, and pointed. “At that unearthly thing. Do you see it, up there, on the attic window of that tottering old house across the road?”

Ambrose’s pupils opened full wide until none of the paleness of his irises remained. That was a beautiful thing to me; and it made me say, “Isn’t it sweet, our kindred’s ability to penetrate gloom of night? A lightless curtain falls upon us; and yet we *see*—beautifully we see. Ah, but I should take all that more for granted had I not been so long absent. It’s only Arkham dusk, and we are Arkham devils. I’ve forgotten, since I’ve been away, how the lucent moon over our witch-town fills us with rare lunacy, enhances arcane senses.”

I turned my gaze from Ambrose and back to the ruined house. “Look at the reflected moon on that attic window,” said I, “and tell me it isn’t a rare sight. The moon has never worn its shape so oddly, has never radiated with such a sickly hue. Whenever has the Mare Insularum looked so like a weepy eye?”

I wrapped my arms together as the hump on my back shuddered slightly. Mehmeah could never speak, and most of my kin assumed her simple, like a child. She was not simple. But even the rare senses of our kind could never pierce the intensity of her lonely cognizance.

“Your twin grows restless,” Ambrose whispered, and I knew that he ached to touch the deformation beneath my cape, however sternly I forbade him to do so. She was no longer sleeping and I had no more excuse to give. He scooted backward along the tomb’s slab as I unhooked the clasp at my throat. The cape fell back, and Ambrose leaned forward, close, and said, “Sweet Mehmeah. Lovely Mehmeah,” as though speaking to a child. He turned his two-fingered shoulder toward Mehmeah and delicately petted her cheek. She spoke to him in the only way she could: “Meh. Meh. Meh. Ah meh meh.” It was an endearing noise, like that of a pet, and I well knew Ambrose loved her as he might love a sister or a niece, if not only a housecat or jewel-scaled serpent.

She and I were fused along our spines. In places her spine and mine were one. She had barely any legs, and the tiny feet of an infant, but her arms were long and spindly and curiously hinged so that if she wanted to, she could embrace me at her back. However, spasticity made a calm embrace unlikely, and Ambrose ducked expertly when she thrashed at him with her claws. “Dear Mehmeah,” he said. “Dear, dear Mehmeah.”

He cocked his head and wore a sly grin. He turned his eyes from me and Mehmeah to gaze again at the antiquated house that rotted beneath miasmic moonglow. He said, “I could tell you curious legends of that haunted house, if you cared to know it—though I would hate to bore you further.”

Ah, so he was still a little angry with me, but mostly ameliorated by the calming influence Mehmeah had upon him, now as during our mutual childhoods. I watched his raised, nearly simian foot hover near me, hesitating, and then move in curious fashion to make some outré sign unto the moon. Softly, I laughed at my cousin and then pushed off the ossuary so as to fall onto my knees near to his other foot, which I took into my hands and, bending lower, kissed.

With my face so much nearer to the ground, I could sense the power of his etched sigil that he had copied from the rare tome I had given him as gift. I was suddenly struck by the possibility that this symbol, from the book I had found for him while I dwelt in Boston, may once have been matched

by the nearly worn emblem on the tomb, perhaps also of that oriel window of the antique house. Had I not in all innocence selected that volume myself, I would have suspected some conspiracy. For the witch-born, could there ever be such a thing as coincidence?

Releasing his foot, I sank my face onto that symbol in the earth and took the scent of the soil, not minding if particles of dust adhered to lips or entered nostrils. I needed to comprehend that which was most incomprehensible. I whispered the sound of that arcane symbol; as the noise sighed from me I could feel the nails of Mehmeh's spidery hands sink into my buttocks and clutch at flesh that began to bleed. As I stood, Ambrose pressed his youthful forehead against mine, as if to bless me with unholy benediction.

"You were going to tell me the legend of that house," I reminded him as I raised my eyes and examined the haunted mansion.

"Do you remember, eight years ago, when a story called 'The Attic Window' appeared in *Whispers*? That was before you began writing your macabre poems for the magazine."

"Yes, the story was by your friend, Carter, to whom you've yet to introduce me. He's turned novelist, hasn't he? I recall the story as being rather slight but written with a wonderful conviction that I found compelling. Its grotesque and violent climax shocked some readers and the magazine was pulled from shelves in, where was it, Indiana? It caused no such sensation here."

Ambrose lifted his nude foot and pointed to the house across the street. "That's the place that inspired Carter's story—that house of minacious reputation. Over the decades there have been reports—legends, rather—of a thing with a blemished eye that huddles near that attic window, the one on which yon moon is so curiously reflected. That thing, it was whispered, was more than a beast yet less than a man. It was said to roam out of its habitation in darkest night and steal into the rooms of sleeping mortals, resting on a victim's chest like some incubus glowering with a darkened visage that by stages grows refulgent, until the sleeper wakes with gaping bloody gashes on chest or back. Carter had heard tell of such incidents in which chests were torn full wide and the heart was taken; he incorporated them into his shocking story. What he did not suspect was that the slain had

the better of it; the survivors seemed thereafter to possess nothing of a soul, and if not catatonic were at least incapable of beneficence or pleasure.”

Ambrose was silent for some few moments, and a curious expression dimmed his eyes. “I ventured within that old place once, alone. You know that I am not a timid fellow. Even so, there was an aura of danger so palpable that it chased me from that place, as I didn’t want its power or its aura to corrupt my dreaming. I remain even now convinced there was a presence, and not at all certain it achieved no degree of dominion over me. I could almost taste it in the closed air of the house, the diseased dreaming of some nameless agency.”

“Very wise of you to forsake those sullen rooms. We Arkham devils are prudent indeed. As much as we love to evoke the sleeping dreams of a witch-town, we recognize those pockets of horror that are best left to their own anguished slow corrosion. We will not be found dancing beneath the moon in some ghoul-infested graveyard atop Hangman’s Hill, although we may whistle as we pass such a place so as to charm its sequestered denizens.”

“Will you not, then?” said Ambrose, clearly doubtful of my claim of reticence.

“Well, tonight, I confess, I am feeling bold, and bored.”

I rose to my feet and faced the house.

“Are you certain?” said my cousin, and I knew that had he the arm with which to take hold of me, he would have stayed my momentum. The jaundiced moon was no longer reflected on the attic window. I raised my hands toward the ancient edifice so as to feel its moody climate of daemonic decay. I sensed the things of the past, things long dead, and others not fully deceased. I felt them as a psychic pulse emanating from the house.

“Surely you don’t mean to venture into that den of madness and murder,” said Ambrose, but he already knew the answer. “I would counsel not!”

“Then why did you suggest this meeting place?”

“Not to tempt you, surely!” he protested.

Ignoring his alarm, I followed my own senses, walking out of the graveyard and across the road. I knew that I was answering an esoteric instinct, and my twin knew it as well, for she dug her nails deeper into my flesh and began a muted complaint of “Meh, meh, meh, meh!” She flung her long thin arms above her head and wrapped them around me. Blood

issued from my bared shoulders, for my cape was left behind, and my sister kicked her tiny feet and thrashed her twiggy arms as if to convince me to pry no further into inapprehensible mystery.

I remained oblivious to Mehme's tearing touch. I was more heedful of her palpitating little heart. But I could comprehend another pulsation before me, as if the house shuddered at the hazard of my advance. And it was queer, but I felt that this house was in some forgotten and foreboding manner the symbolic soul of our sorcerous village, this brooding Arkham, this realm of fantastic secrets. It stood before me like some dismal echo of distant pasts, a storehouse of filched hearts, the hub of prisoned souls. Although it had stood for centuries, for all its disrepair there was nothing decrepit or frail about its aura. It had a certain iron strength.

A curious blend of threat and welcome embraced me as I began to climb the steps to the porch, as though I were kindred, lost and newly found. The manse gathered its shadows around me. Here was an edifice as tainted as my witch-blood; I sense that very elixir surge through my veins with a queer vitality.

I stood before the door and saw that vandals had shattered one of the small windowpanes. There were small shards of glass at my feet. Crookedly, I smiled, for one windowpane only had been violated, among the rich offering of windows the dwelling presented. Whatever momentary courage the trespasser had gloried in it had been short-lived.

Bending low, I picked up a shard of glass and poked it into an extended finger. With beads of blood I wrote my name, Alluna, upon the ancient wood of the door. With the final pressure of my finger on the aged wood, the door opened, granting me ingress.

Shadows, dust, and cobwebs moved before me as I stepped into their region. A fungal gleam crept along the mildew walls, like some putrescent little cousin of St. Elmo's Fire. My diminutive sibling had stopped ripping at my flesh; she clung to my shoulders from fright and no longer made a sound. I could feel palpitations of her puny heart at my—our—spine.

I climbed one interior staircase, and then a second, and a third, high and higher, toward an attic room where remnants of a broken lock hung on hinges and the door stood open bare inches, wedged upon the warped boards of the floor.

The room's ceiling was quite low; I had to stoop as I squeezed through the door. How incomprehensible, the stench within this small area, like a peculiarly infected seepage.

A draft of cool air touched me. I turned to glance at the attic window whereon I had seen the distorted reflection of the sickly moon. I realized that I had seen no such thing, for there was no glass inside the window frame, and a cool night breeze began to pour inside the musty compartment. Shadows of various hue lurked at corners, one of which tickled my fancy in some fantastic way. I turned my head to gaze.

A perverse urge persuaded me to summon the beast of legend, for such it seemed I had seen as a blur of shadow expanding with motion. An upper portion of the vague shape blossomed into a sphere of sickly yellow hue; by its faint fungal glow I quietly studied the distorted head, the slit that was its slimy mouth, the blemished eye.

TO OUTSIDERS, THERE IS BOTH HORROR AND DISDAIN for our inbred kind, but from within, those among us who are least human are most divine. And our desires, our natures, draw us toward the hallowed night, the aphotic marriage chamber. The pheromonal scent drew from me a smile of adoration, for I recognized in this creature's pallid luminosity the true and divine spark of angels, inclusive of those fallen. An egomaniacal pride sprang within me, that I might be the Mother of the One, the darkly beatific and transcendently inhuman savior. Part instinct, part occult knowing, I was drawn toward the creature of the attic, as he was drawn to me.

His own excitement at scent of me increased his wan sheen. He took a step forward from out the darker shadows, and I saw by his nakedness his knobby, knotted, rawboned arms and legs, the sunken cavity of his skeletal chest and torso, the outsized and round head that wobbled and shined and oozed a greasy sweat.

I saw that this enticing monstrosity was aroused. I wanted to strip myself for his sake, but the glowering inflamed eye now held me in rapt thrall. He eased his way closer, closer, until his long bony arms could reach me. My arms were heavy, but I raised my hand, palm up, a finger extended, the finger with the tiny wound. He bent his head and I thought he would suck my finger for the blood, as indeed he seemed to contemplate.

But then swiftly the talons of his twisted fingers began to tear away my dress. I tried to find the strength to take him in a most loving embrace, but with a nearly angry swiftness he spun me round and shoved me violently, face first, into a rubble pile of bones of bats and birds and rodents. It was Mehmehe he desired; and it was I that was forsaken.

Mehmehe had for long moments grown stark still. But now she was mewling. She spread her dwarfish legs. She wrapped her spidery arms around her paramour. As she was part of me I felt as well as she the painful thrusting of the twisted member.

My face and breasts were poked and pierced by tiny bones upon the floor, as Mehmehe and the moonfaced creature rutted. I was no more than their bed, an object, not the beloved, and for the first time in my life I hated Mehmehe, hated that she and never I might be the Mother of Night's Ally.

A spiteful delirium of animosity enveloped my psyche with such venom that I could not long remain conscious. I was benumbed. I felt myself fading from existence, failing in my battle to stay alert. The sound of repellent lovers receded, became fainter and more remote, as torpidity overcame all awareness, and oblivion devoured me.

FOR WEEKS OR MONTHS I STAYED INSIDE MYSELF, IN cloudy depression, and had not Ambrose volunteered as nurse to me and Mehmehe, surely I would have dried up and died. He tended to us lovingly and tried not to reveal his favoritism for Mehmehe. In time my convalescence permitted me to sit while Ambrose read to me, to eat without his having to hold a spoon to my lips, even at times to converse without severe signs of despondency.

One evening I lay on my side facing the wall, as Ambrose fed and cooed at Mehmehe, his toes as nimble as fingers when tending to his little cousin. Her stomach had become a taut protrusion. Ambrose murmured solemnly: "I will always take care of you Mehmehe, Alluna. The three of you. All I have ever wanted is a sweet nocturnal family."

My spirits calmed, and both Mehmehe and I descended toward slumber as Ambrose intoned: "Thou art the Light. Thou art the Darkness. For what is the Pitch of Night but Light unmanifest? Yea, though I stride in the furnace of dawn, thou art my shade, my dark respite; thou art the cool air, the trinity

of My Stygian Lord, the Mother of the Lord of Night, and Nursemaid of the Divine Illuminator. Amen.”

Spiderwebs in the Dark

DARRELL SCHWEITZER

Darrell Schweitzer is the author of three novels, The White Isle, The Shattered Goddess, and The Mask of the Sorcerer, and about 300 short stories, which have appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies, including Twilight Zone, Interzone, Amazing Stories, Night Cry, Cemetery Dance, and Postscripts. He has been nominated four times for the World Fantasy Award and won it once, for Weird Tales, of which he was coeditor for nineteen years. He has also edited or coedited anthologies, including The Secret History of Vampires, Cthulhu's Reign, Full Moon City, and That Is Not Dead (forthcoming from PS Publishing in 2015).

SURE, I CAN TELL YOU HOW I FIRST MET WALTER Stephens, or G. C. Coleman or Charles Comnenus-Paleologus or whatever he was calling himself that week. Yes, the poet, sometime-novelist of indeterminate age, nationality, everything—and if you’re writing a book about him some of this may even prove to be of use. But I think I’d rather cast it as a tale. We can even imagine that you and I are two well-traveled gentlemen sitting together on a stormy, wintry night like this one, in some terribly exclusive club, and the fire is burning low, and after the waiter has served the last round of drinks and slipped out, silent as a cat—

I’m afraid not. Strictly no alcohol allowed here, but I could get you a bottled water, I suppose—

Never mind. In such an atmosphere, some old duffer (me) suddenly stirs and mumbles reflectively, “You know, it was on such a night as this when I happened to be in a particularly remote district of rural Sweden”—or maybe Zamboanga or Trebizond or just a part of the New Jersey Pine Barrens that *nobody* has ever heard of—“that I encountered something *odd*.”

Use your imagination. On a night like this, well into winter when the sun sets in the middle of the afternoon and if you look out of a window—and I ask you, how many people bother to *look* out beyond the immediate boundaries of their lives these days, or even out a window? But I digress. You see the landscape fade into muted browns and then grays and a steely blue, then it’s so black you can’t tell the earth from the sky and the few lights from the distant neighbors might also be stars—I digress again to explain that this was in the old days when I still ran the Headless Shakespeare Bookstore, on Paoli Pike, Chester County, well west of Philadelphia. Hence the specific, faded palette in winter, because this really was Andrew Wyeth country. It was called the Headless Shakespeare because the old barn with add-ons which I’d converted into both a dwelling and a place of business happened to have in the front yard a kitschy Victorian marble statue of the Bard, in doublet and tights, holding a pen in one hand and in the other a skull (engraved YORICK in large letters just in case you didn’t get it), but, alas, missing Sweet Will’s head. What to do with a fine old antique like that? Junk it? Hell no. I installed a little shelf, and in good weather used it to display a few of the four-for-a-dollar books,

with my sign leaning against Will's knees. It became something of a landmark. There are pictures of it in older editions of *Weird Pennsylvania*.

Suffice it to say that in such a place, on such an evening, I did indeed encounter something *odd*, in the person of Walter Padraic Eochaid Nera O'Blarney, the very subject of your investigative biography.

I WAS CLOSING UP. THE LAST OF THE REGULARS, Mrs. Templeton, who sometimes seemed to spend all day in the romance section but always left with a satisfactory amount of purchases, had just gone. I flipped the sign around to read CLOSED. I flicked off the outside lights, and it was then that I heard a noise from deep within the store.

"Is anybody there?" I called out.

There was a distinct shuffling, and then a low voice. Something that almost sounded like *chanting*.

"Hello?"

I followed the sound around several corners and down a couple aisles until I saw, in front of the shelf in the Classics section, a quite large figure in a shabby raincoat, with his back to me. He was indeed muttering softly, in a kind of a sing-song. But more to the point, I distinctly saw him take a ballpoint pen and *mark* something in the book he holding—a little green volume, probably one of the Greek Loeb editions.

"Hey!" I said. "You scribble in it, you bought it!"

He turned around suddenly, and I will admit I really did cringe backward when confronted by—to reach for the nearest handy cliché—an immense bear of a man with wild black hair, enormous, drooping moustache, and scruffy beard, easily twice my own size, with a look on his face that was—I will not spare the phrase—*quite, quite mad*, as if he'd been utterly caught up in something and was decidedly unhappy about being interrupted. But that look was gone in an instant, like a mask falling off, and he said in a perfectly calm voice, "Of course I'll pay for it." He swept several more off the shelf. "I'll take the whole set."

Dubious, I led him back to the counter. On the way I caught about half of his babble about how *words of power*, or *keys to vibration* or *somedamnsuch* were to be found randomly scattered throughout books, as if all literature were one vast cipher to be decoded with "*cosmic* results," and I thought, well, sure, fine, he was a complete wacko, and I could only hope

he was a wacko with money, which he was. He paid for the books with dirty, wadded-up twenty-dollar bills that seemed to be rolled into balls in his pockets. I never saw a wallet. The books turned out to be a set of Euripides, and he even showed me, for just a second, the passage he had underlined, but it was on the Greek side of the text and I couldn't make it out. As I was ringing it up and uncrumpling those bills, he tapped a finger on the glass case and said, "Oh, and I'll take that too," indicating a fine first edition of Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* that was priced at five hundred dollars. I didn't doubt he had more of those bills. He went on producing them, but still I hesitated for just a second, reluctant to turn over a volume as nice as that to somebody who might scribble in it, but he met my gaze and he seemed to read my thought and he said, with a half-laugh, "Oh no, that's not for my research. It's for leisure reading." Then he loomed up over me—it was as if he'd been slouching all this time—like an avalanche ready to let go, and he said, "Philip, you and I are going to be fast friends."

I supposed he'd gotten my name from somewhere, like the little stack of my business cards on the counter.

And he said further, "Don't ask how I know. I just do. I've looked back on it all and *seen it*." There was one more word I couldn't make out, something almost unpronounceable, sort of like "fhtagn."

Which was *odd*, you must admit, and it was stranger still that when he went out the door and I locked up after him I didn't see any headlights or hear a car pull away—hard to imagine a big, fat guy like that walking for miles in the dark and the wet, no matter how well the books were wrapped in plastic. I didn't even hear footsteps on the gravel driveway. Just sleet rattling against the glass. I almost expected him to come back in a minute, but he didn't; which was, undeniably, at least mildly inexplicable, if not nearly as much so as the fact that his prediction or prophecy or whatever you want to call it actually came true.

YOU HAVE TO GIVE WALRUS CREDIT—YES, HE INSISTED that his closest friends, none of whom I ever met, really did fondly alter his first name *Walter* into *Walrus*; and sometimes his moustache and his girth did give that impression—he was a really good storyteller. The best I have ever known. The very next night, at precisely the same hour, he

appeared in precisely the same manner (how *did* he get in past me, when I was sitting at the counter by the door?) and told me a perfectly fascinating story of how he'd met Shirley Jackson once and what she'd told him, which revealed a secret of her life that has evaded all biographers, and which changed his. And before I could think it through—wait a minute, she died in 1965, which would make him *how old?*—he merely said, “Of course I was quite a bit younger then.” Then he started talking about Paris, and some of the people he knew when he lived there. I almost thought he'd start telling me about Hemingway and Gertrude Stein, but, no, it was a very funny if disquieting story about getting drunk with Gore Vidal when *he* lived there. Did Vidal ever live in Paris? I'd have to look it up in the biography. Before I could even think about it, Walrus was right past me with something else. He had *lots* of stories like that. He told them supremely well. He kept me entertained for a lot of long evenings, well after closing.

He was independently wealthy, so it seemed, and very widely traveled. I will tell you that sometimes he disappeared for weeks at a time, and postcards arrived from very distant parts of the world, with real (sometimes) messages in his handwriting and real, foreign postage stamps. Yes, once I actually got one from Zamboanga. (I didn't make that up; real place, in the Philippines. “The monkeys have no tails there,” he said obscurely.) But much of the time he showed up at the Headless Shakespeare. (“I think I know where the head is,” he told me once. “But it's like the arms of the Venus de Milo. You don't want 'em.”) You know, I don't think I ever did see him come in through the front door. I'd just turn around and he'd be there. “*Boo!*” And I'd say “How the *fuck* did you do that?” and he'd just tell me a story. He was there so much that sometimes people I half knew would give me that look as if to say, *Good for you Philip, you've finally found someone*, but, no, it was not like that at all, it was never like that, even when we got very, very close, as it worked out, because in addition to his having been everywhere and met everyone, Walrus had the disconcerting habit of knowing *everything* about someone he met. I saw him do it to others. It really spooked them. He did it to me. He'd make a casual reference to an incident in my childhood, maybe something really painful, like, “That time you caught your sister stealing and she got you blamed for it, and you never forgave her, well maybe you

should have because once she was dead it was too late.” And before I could say, “Wait a minute, I never told you *that!*” he would be on with some other anecdote (involving famous people, in exotic parts of the world) that illustrated in a very gentle, very real, very emotionally resonant manner why I should have forgiven her, because sometimes to get anywhere in the world you have to know when to let go and just let things happen, as if you’re a leaf floating in a stream.

“The Buddha said that,” he said.

Did he really? I wanted to ask him, but did not. *How did you two get along? Before you had the falling out over Attila the Hun, I mean.*

There were times when I just couldn’t believe a word of this, when I *refused* to believe, when what I thought were the remaining tatters of my reason told me that if someone tells you *one* remarkable story, it’s interesting, but when he tells you fifty, he must be a goddamn pathological liar. It’s like the difference between seeing a UFO and being abducted by aliens *every week*. But he always had an answer for me, even when I more or less openly challenged him. So why *did* he travel all over the world and use a dozen aliases and publish books under more pseudonyms than anybody could ever track down? “Are you a secret agent or something?” I wanted to know, and he merely smiled and replied, “If I told you, it wouldn’t be a secret, now would it? No, I am not a secret agent. That’s only my cover.”

“So, if you’re some incredibly special muckety-muck whatever, why are you devoting all this attention *to me?*”

He actually looked a little hurt when I asked him that. “Because we are friends,” he said. “As I told you, I looked back on all this and saw that we had become *fast friends*. Like Damon and Pythias. David and Jonathan. Frodo and Sam. I thought you understood that. Well, I think it is time to change your perspective. To make things clearer for you.”

DID HE MAKE THINGS CLEARER? AS CLEAR AS THE view you might enjoy while taking a ride in a washing machine. Things got quickly weirder after that. Now I have said that one of the things that kept me fascinated, caught like a deer in headlights, is the way that he did somehow seem to know the most intimate things about my life, or lack of life really. He knew that I’d had literary ambitions myself as a young man

and nothing had come of them, and that I'd been a nerd before nerds had become fashionable and never managed to ask a girl out, and I had more or less drifted through life to the age of fifty-three without really *living* any of it. I had absolutely no family, no future except more of the same until the grave, no one to pass on even my accumulations to. My customers used to say I owned more books than God, but God's piles of clutter are probably to some purpose. Mine were just there.

I can't deny he was good for me. He did know how to comfort and encourage, and he even got me writing again.

You know the results. Negligible, but undeniably published.

But I must digress into metaphysics. One evening in the store Walrus asked me if I had the *Necronomicon* in stock and I said only the paperback, that Simon thing. "That's crap," he said. "Never mind." And he launched into his theory again, if you could call it that, that all reality, the universe, everything, was one vast palimpsest of texts, one written on top of the next. No, he wasn't turning onto a deconstructionist on me, he said. Not like that at all. Reality itself was an immense cipher. You had to recognize the words, which could be anywhere, and if you could string them together and repeat them *just right*— and, yes, it did sound like chanting—then you could set up a vibration and—whatever.

"Did you ever wonder how sorcerers call up demons?" he said. "I mean, why should some extra-earthly being come streaking over light-years and through dimensions just because some human being on this tiny speck of dust said the magic words?"

That is, assuming there are such things as sorcerers and demons and the both of us were not certifiably insane at this point. *I can call spirits from the vasty deep.*

"Really good hearing?" I said feebly.

All this while he had been scribbling frantically on a notepad. He held up the result. There was a solid black circle in the middle, and all sorts of wiggly lines spreading out from it in all directions.

"What's that?" I said. "The hairball that exploded?"

"Look—*there*." He reached out and seemed to take hold of something in the air in front of my face, like a drifting hair or something. "Do you see that?"

I wasn't going to admit I'd seen anything. *Had* I seen anything?

And he explained at great length and with remarkable clarity, enough to dampen down any doubts, skepticism, or remaining shreds of sanity, that the whole universe, the cosmos, the macrocosmos, the whole kablooey was filled with *lines of touch*, as he called them, force, energy, something like that, but none of those words quite described it. Think of spiderwebs in the dark. Most people can't see them, but some people, the very sensitive ones, the sort who become Ascended Masters or black magicians or whatever, can *feel* them as they walk through the world. The way you call a spirit from the vasty deep is to set up just the right vibration, which attracts the attention of *something* very far away, which comes skittering down the web or whatever it is.

"You mean the way a struggling fly attracts the spider?"

"Something like that," he said.

"I don't think I'd care to meet that kind of spider."

"The trick is not getting stuck."

So he decided that then and there I needed a practical demonstration, and that I was ready for it.

"Here, take this," he said, reaching into the air for another drifting strand of nothing.

And I took it, and whether or not I actually saw something—like a hair, like a thread, like a line of fire scratched in the air—I cannot truly say; but he took it between his fingers and I took it between mine, and with his other hand he held my free hand very tightly. He was chanting something, which might have been in Greek, or might have been a mathematical formula, or a little bit of both, and then we were *gone*, falling in darkness for just a second. Then I came to a stop with a jerk and opened my eyes and saw that we were in a moving car, *my* car, only Walrus was driving. It was dark. A couple of farmhouses passed by. I thought I knew where we were, but not quite. Somewhere out in the country. Then we came to a little town and went along a street past white picket fences—even in the dark I could see this was all Norman Rockwell stuff, idyllic, perfectly maintained late Victorian houses—and we pulled into a driveway. Walrus pointed the porch light, to the front door.

"You just go up there and go in. Don't even knock."

"But I—"

"Go."

I was enough under his spell by then, or completely crazy, or sufficiently convinced this was a dream, that I obeyed. I shuffled across the leaf-covered lawn, up to that door, and went in. There was a woman inside, wearing an apron. She'd just come from the kitchen. She looked surprised to see me, but not surprised as if a complete stranger had just burst into her house, but as if she knew me but had expected I'd be out shopping or something.

But before either one of us could say anything two little girls, maybe seven and four, came running into the room, screaming, "Daddy! Daddy! Come and see our Christmas tree!"

So I followed them into the living room and admired the Christmas tree, and then we were called into dinner and the woman who presumably took me for her husband and the mother of these children looked at me very strangely and asked guarded questions, and it was all I could do not to laugh out loud at the irony of my reply that I didn't feel entirely myself today. After dinner I got up and nervously paced around the room, and back into the living room, noticing the pictures on the walls, some of which had me in them, and this woman, and these kids. I stopped before a cabinet filled with books, many of which had my name on the spine. I recognized my first (and, as far as I knew it, only) novel, *Into the Abyss*, but there were at least a dozen more, three of them sharing the byline with none other than Walter Stevens. One was a children's book entitled *The Walrus Came Back*.

But before I could wrap my head around any of this the front door opened and there stood a man who looked *exactly* like a less shabbily dressed version of myself, holding a bundle of wrapped presents up to his chin. He dropped everything as he let out a gasp and half of a curse; and his eyes and mine met, and *he knew*. The wife screamed. I pushed my way out of the house, into the night. I couldn't waste time wondering how they worked *that* one out, because in a minute I seemed to be falling again into darkness, and then I was in the speeding car with Walrus, and there was, very visibly, a fiber of some sort, like a luminous piece of string floating in the air in front of my face. It extended out *through* the windshield into infinity, or at least very, very far up into the sky, and before I knew what was what Walrus and I had both grabbed onto it, and we were both chanting something that was definitely not *Om mani padme hum*, I assure you, and then we were falling again, and we hit the dirt and rolled to a stop right at

the edge of a cliff, before a hole in the ground the size of the Grand Canyon, only it was filled with fire down there, and there came a sound rising up, which might have been the wind or volcanic gases escaping or God knows what, but sure reminded me of a million voices screaming all at once in terror and pain.

“Ah Mephistopheles...” I whispered, and my voice was not my own. It was part of that rushing wind.

Or maybe he was going to play Virgil and lead me on a tour of the depths, all the way down to the frozen lake at the core of the world and safely out over the Devil’s butt, but I really doubted it, I really did; and I don’t know for certain if that was Hell at all, but I did notice that the air was foul and sulfurous and there were *two* huge suns glaring down at us through a murky orange sky.

Then, *again*, my friend and I were chanting, and grabbing hold of a thread that wove through the air, and falling in darkness, and once again we were in the speeding car. He had to swing the wheel wildly to avoid a head-on and get back into the lane while headlights blinded us and a truck’s horn blared deafeningly.

And *again* we were somewhere else, in a quiet, cold place, where we walked over an icy wasteland beneath a black and brilliant sky, toward a mountain that rose high above us, atop which a single, brilliant light gleamed like a baleful eye.

An infinity of worlds, he explained to me, not in the spaces we know, but *between them*, all of which opened up to the bold philosopher who had found the way into them, as he had.

Spiderwebs in the dark, leading everywhere and *everywhen*. When I asked him, again, *Why me? Why had he singled out me for this revelation?* he replied that he’d had many such protégés or apprentices in the course of his travels, but *looking back from the future*, he saw the already accomplished fact that he and I had become soulmates to a degree that surpasses understanding, and therefore, because it was already so, he came back and made it happen, materializing out of the air in the Classics section of the Headless Shakespeare Bookshop one wet wintry night, and the rest was, you might say, history.

An infinity of worlds, touch all times and places and possibilities. There was indeed a world in which my life had turned out very differently, and

perhaps happily, and I had a family, and there was another in which mankind had never evolved on the Earth and organic life, if the term could even be applied to what dwelt there instead, was of a wholly different order.

There was an infinity in which Walrus Stephens really had been everywhere and met everybody and all his stories were true.

There was a world in which the two of us, not at all adequately dressed for conditions, were walking across the Cold Waste toward that very Kadath which is described in the *Neconomicon*—the real one, not that load of crap by Simon—and maybe in one variant of events we two froze to death before we got very far, and in another, perhaps, we were carried up to the summit by rubbery, faceless, winged things serving a master whose face is never seen; but before either of those things happened he and I caught hold of a thread of light in the air and spoke the words carefully attuned to its vibrations and found ourselves once more speeding along in the car, only this time *I* was driving and it was burning daylight outside and we were screeching bumpily along through a desert. I barely managed to brake before crashing into one boulder, then several, smashing in the whole front of the car, steam exploding from the fractured radiator, while I gaped down in terror at the realization that we were tottering on the edge of a canyon at least a mile deep, filled with fire and the screams of damned souls.

Now in one version of that reality, I am sure, the car tottered over with us in it, taking us to our deaths, but in *another* version I managed to scream and pound on Walrus with my fists and push him out the passenger door and crawl out after him *before* the car tottered over the edge and bounced again and again off outcroppings until it vanished from sight amid the swirling smoke.

There was only one sun in the sky this time, but it damn near fried us both to a crisp as we crawled amid the rocks in a desperate search for shade. We could only wait till nightfall—the sky was filled with strange stars, no familiar constellations at all—and then we reached up to the golden, fiery threads drifting down out of that sky, and climbed them, up, between the angles, between the spaces, toward a kind of terrifying glory I cannot begin to put into words.

OF COURSE I WAS CERTAIN THAT I WAS COMPLETELY insane by that point, and I weep to think of it, to think that being crazy is *not* the easy answer you

expect it to be, the handy escape from all your pains and terrors. You think of that mad clergyman on *Monty Python*, the one from St. Looney-Up-the-Cream-Bun-and-Jam who sings “Dee-dee-DEE-DEE-dee!” while smashing plates over his head. At least *I* think of him, and I weep, because I know it’s not as easy as that, though I have tried, God, I have tried, and maybe that’s why we only use paper plates here.

Because, you see, I have only *just gotten* to the *really* crazy part, which I would have to be insane to imagine. It may be true that somewhere amid the infinite possibilities of infinite worlds we two reached the center of mindless, nuclear chaos at the center of the universe and danced worshipfully with the blind pipers there. It may be true that we became lords of planets, dark wizards whose very words and gestures destroyed whole worlds and races, or raised them up and molded them to our whims. It is entirely possible that we two learned the secret of everything and wrote it down, in modern handwriting, in ballpoint, on a parchment that was buried in some ruined, non-human city for a million years before emerging again to drive the finder as mad as either one of us already were.

What is distinctly true is that we discovered that the lines of force, or threads, or spiderwebs in the dark, or whatever you want to call them are inhabited, or perhaps I should say *infested* with something which is *not*, I think, the originating species that spun out such structures, *not* the spiders that may come skittering down the vibrating web to snatch up their struggling prey, but some kind of *vermin*, cosmic lice that move along those lines, between those spaces, with an agenda of their own, quite, quite beneath the notice of the great Powers and Presences whose existence we but dimly perceive, but quite noticeable enough to similar vermin, such as ourselves, who might presume to pry into secrets we were never meant to know and which only the insane would ever attempt to discover.

I was the first to see one of them. In the abyss, as we climbed between the worlds, amid the stars, with the galaxies spread out before us like foam, I looked back, behind us—my friend, mentor, guide, cicerone gazed only forward and upward—and I saw something following us, which did indeed look insectoid, like an enormous louse or bedbug—*vermin* of some kind, the size of a large dog, with a shape the eye and the mind could not quite sort out, for all it distinctly had golden, segmented armor and dozens, maybe hundreds of limbs, with distressingly human-like hands, and an even

more distressingly human-like face, which looked like my own in the mirror, only bloated and distorted and mad. It screamed at me, some kind of chanting, almost words.

The most horrible detail of all, I discerned as it drew ever nearer, was that it too had vermin upon it, millions of tiny replicas of itself, swarming, so that its very surface rippled like boiling water.

Now in one version of infinite probability, as the thing crawled over us, as it *touched* me, Walrus Stephens, my dear, dear friend and buddy and mentor, scurried rapidly on ahead and *left me there* to my fate, like the old joke about the guy who takes his crippled friend walking into a dangerous part of town and explains, *I don't have to outrun the muggers. I just have to outrun you.*

Vile treachery! All those visions, adventures, stories, pretensions, and protestations of friendship just so that I could be bait, a diversion, and he could escape to make his way onward to whatever indescribable glory he sought.

But in another version, which I feel is more *true*, as soon as the first of those awful limbs brushed lightly over us, before the thousand pale, wriggling fingers began to take hold, my companion let out a cry of amazement and disgust, grabbed me by the wrist and yanked me *off* the strand we had been climbing, until we were falling through space once more, into the endless abyss, while the million scattered, fiery spiderweb strands drifted about us in all directions; and I had the great vision which has never left me for an instant, which haunts me in even drugged sleep, of an infinity of time and space completely infested, swarming with vermin which most people can't see, which wriggle in their immeasurable masses all around us, in the air, in the earth, in the walls of our buildings, in the very stones, writhing and crawling, ever ready to burst out and consume us all.

Very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am, but why will you say that I am mad? *I've* said it a hundred times, but you don't have to *agree* with me! Harken! and observe how healthily—how calmly I tell you the rest—

We dropped out of the air, not into the Headless Shakespeare Bookshop or onto the seat of a speeding car—since the car was smashed up and destroyed, as I have already related—but into a shabby, trash-crammed

apartment in a slum district in some northeastern city. I didn't get much of a look around, only an impression. Glaring lights from outside. The place rattled as an elevated train roared by. I saw piles of rubbish of all sorts, one side room stuffed with file boxes of paper bursting out into a heap on the floor, books and manuscripts and letters and old junk mail ankle-deep everywhere, a pile of unwashed dishes in the kitchen sink, *the whole place swarming with vermin*, and I knew somehow that this was the core, the point of origin, back into which all the dreams and possibilities and wonderful, charming, tall tales of Walter Stephens (or whatever his name really was) collapsed like a house of cards into a debris of lies. *Here* they were *not* true, in this one place, cut off from infinity. Now that might have given one cause for hope, because if here, in this single reality, none of the foregoing was true, then the horrors which had *followed us back* out of that endlessly threaded infinity *couldn't be true either*, and maybe, just maybe, if we just let go of everything and breathed very carefully, we could get on with our lives.

But it's not that simple. If only you could break a plate or two over your head and make a silly noise and that would change everything; if only—

It was not that simple. Walrus was there with me, in his apartment, and he was weeping as he locked the doors and windows and then poured out gasoline from a fuel can over the accumulated rubbish.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I really am. I didn't want it to end this way. But there is no other way it can end now."

Maybe just a little bit of my own sanity actually returned at that point, because I began to *reason* and to think like the guy who outran his crippled friend to escape the muggers.

"You don't have to do this," I said. "*Stop*. Just come outside with me. Let's talk. Come home with me. I have a spare room."

He sobbed. "Yes, I *do* have to do it, now, while some part of my mind is still clear, while it's still my own—"

And I saw then that he was telling the truth, that he was *right*, that he had only perhaps minutes left while any part of his mind, of his soul, was still his own and free to act, because *he, his very flesh, was swarming with vermin. Even as they wriggled unseen in the air around us, in the walls, in the very earth beneath our feet, those things, things, devouring things, which swarm through the very cosmos to infinity, which you can read about*

in the real Necronomicon, so they also wriggled and multiplied within him, and I, I whose eyes had been opened, could see them. I could see his face, and the flesh of his hands bubbling and rippling like boiling water. They were inside him. They were devouring him, and he, he, in all his terrible agony, remained sane enough, brave enough to attempt to be the savior of mankind by destroying himself and everything he knew, and every connection he had made to that hideous infinity.

Only I, like the base, treacherous coward who abandoned his crippled friend, I only thought of myself and tried to escape. Stephens was twice my size, a huge man, powerful even when not frenzied. I knew I couldn't overpower him. So I backed slowly toward the locked door while he poured out the gasoline.

I looked about desperately. I grabbed a folder of papers. It was the manuscript of what was supposed to be his next book of poems.

"Look," I said. "I'll just take this with me and get it published, as a memorial volume. Wouldn't you like that? It's good stuff. It should be preserved."

He tossed aside the gas can and waded toward me. He had a cigarette lighter in one hand.

With the other he caught hold of my wrist with a grip that seemed to be breaking bones. The papers scattered to the floor.

I looked into his face. His features were almost unrecognizable, bruised, blackened, bubbling, and writhing, his face bursting in splatters of blood as little, screaming, verminthings chewed their way through the surface of his skin.

Only his eyes were still his. Only there did I catch one last, fading glimpse of my old friend Walrus. He was heroic at the end, I tell you. He held on to his humanity, his last shreds of self, to the very last minute, because he *had to*. I think that at the very end, he acted out of *friendship*. Not mercy, but desperate friendship.

"Somebody's got to warn the world," I said. "Someone has to tell them. About... everything."

"Yes," he said. "I guess someone does."

He let go of my wrist, then reached up and unbolted the door.

I ran out onto the street. The apartment exploded behind me in a shower of hot glass as the windows blew out.

And that is how I escaped. That is how I am able to tell you this story.

But it's not as simple as that. Nobody gets off so easily, you see, and it was only minutes before the morbid fear came over me that, if the vermin things had followed Walter Walrus Stephens out of hyperspace and infested him, they should have followed and infested *me too*. So of course I took the only logical course of action and with one of those hot shards that had blown out of the apartment I did my very best to cut the awful, screaming, wriggling things out of myself, and I'd done a pretty thorough job too before I fainted from loss of blood and the police found me; and since this particular mania—look, look, I have scars to prove it—falls well within the familiar paradigms of psychiatric medicine (it is a symptom of a particularly severe form of schizophrenia) or it least it is when you're not *really* infested with wriggling, screaming, all-devouring vermin from beyond infinity—and so, well, conventional treatments were prescribed, and here I am, the only living witness to the fate of Walrus Stephens and the only person who can give you even a hint of the real truth about him.

I don't have much more to say. Visiting hours are over anyway. You'll have to go. *You're welcome*. The least you could do is thank me for taking up so much of my valuable time.

Say, what's that crawling on your shoulder?

One Tree Hill

(The World as Cataclysm)

CAITLÍN R. KIERNAN

Caitlín R. Kiernan is the author of several novels, including Low Red Moon, Daughter of Hounds, and The Red Tree, which was nominated for both the Shirley Jackson and World Fantasy awards. Most recently, her seventh novel, The Drowning Girl: A Memoir, was published by Penguin. Since 2000, her shorter tales of the weird, fantastic, and macabre have been collected in several volumes, including Tales of Pain and Wonder; From Weird and Distant Shores; To Charles Fort, with Love; and The Ammonite Violin and Others. In 2011, Subterranean Press released a retrospective of her early writing, Two Worlds and In Between: The Best of Caitlín R. Kiernan (Volume One), with a second volume planned for 2015. She lives in Providence, R.I., with her partner, Kathryn.

1.

I AM DREAMING. OR I AM AWAKE.

I've long since ceased to care, as I've long since ceased to believe it matters which. Dreaming or awake, my perceptions of the hill and the tree and what little remains of the house on the hill are the same. More importantly, more perspicuously, my *perceptions* of the hill and the house and the tree are the same. Or, as this admittedly is belief, so open to debate, I cannot imagine it would matter whether I am dreaming or awake. And this observation is as good a place to begin as any.

I am told in the village that the tree was struck by lightning just after sunset on St. Crispin's Day, eleven years ago. I am told in the village that no thunderstorm accompanied the lightning strike, that the October sky was clear and dappled with stars. The Village. It has a name, though I prefer to think, and refer, to it simply as The Village. Nestled snugly—some would say claustrophobically—between the steep foothills of New Hampshire's White Mountains, within what geographers name the Sandwich Range, and a deep lake the villagers call Witalema. On my maps, the lake has no name at all. A librarian in The Village told me that Witalema was derived from the language of the Abenakis, from the word *gwitaalema*, which, she said, may be roughly translated as “to fear someone.” I've found nothing in any book or anywhere online that refutes her claim, though I have also found nothing to confirm it. So I will always think of that lake and its black, still waters as Lake Witalema, and choose not to speculate on why its name means “to fear someone.” I found more than enough to fear on the aforementioned lightning-struck hill.

There is a single, nameless cemetery in The Village, located within a stone's throw of the lake. The oldest headstone I have found there dates back to 1674. That is, the man buried in the plot died in 1674. He was born in 1645. The headstone reads *Ye blooming Youth who see this Stone / Learn early Death may be your own*. It seems oddly random to me that only the word *see* makes use of the Latin *s*. In stray moments I have wondered

what the dead man might have *feen* to warrant this peculiarity of the inscription, or if it is merely an engraver's mistake that was not corrected and so has survived these past three hundred and thirty-eight years. I dislike the cemetery, perhaps because of its nearness to the lake, and so I have only visited it once. Usually, I find comfort in graveyards, and I have a large collection of charcoal rubbings taken from gravestones in New England.

But why, I ask myself, do I shy from the cemetery, and possibly only because of its closeness to Lake Witalema, when I returned repeatedly to the hill and the tree and what little remains of the house on the hill? It isn't a question I can answer. I doubt I will ever be able to answer it. I only know that what I have seen on that hilltop is far more dreadful than anything the lake could ever have to show me.

I am climbing the hill, and I am awake, or I am asleep.

I'm thinking about the lightning strike on St. Crispin's Day, lightning from a clear night sky, and I'm thinking of the fire that consumed the house and left the tree a gnarled charcoal crook. Also, my mind wanders—probably defensively—to the Vatican's decision that too little evidence can be found to prove the existence of either of the twin brothers, St. Crispin and St. Crispinian, and how they survived their first close call with martyrdom, after being tossed into a river with millstones tied about their necks, only to be beheaded, finally, by decree of Rictus Barus. Climbing up that hill, pondering obscure Catholic saints who may not ever have lived, it occurs to me I may read too much. Or only read too much into what I read. I pause to catch my breath, and I glance up at the sky. Today there are clouds, unlike the night the lightning came. If the villagers are to be believed, of course. And given the nature of what sits atop the hill, the freak strike that night seems not so miraculous. The clouds seem to promise rain, and I'll probably be soaking wet by the time I get back to my room in the rundown motel on the outskirts of the village. Faraway, towards what my tattered topographic map calls Mount Passaconaway, there is the low rumble of thunder (*Passaconaway* is another Indian name, from the Pennacook, a tribe closely related to the Abenakis, but I have no idea whatsoever what the word might mean). The trail is steep here, winding between spruce and pine, oaks, poplars, and red maples. I imagine the maple leaves must appear to catch fire in the autumn. Catch fire or bleed. The hill always turns my thoughts morbid, a mood that is not typical of my

nature. Reading this, one might think otherwise, but that doesn't change the truth of it. Having caught my breath, I continue up the narrow, winding path, hoping to reach the summit before the storm catches up with me. Weathered granite crunches beneath my boots.

"Were I you," said the old man who runs The Village's only pharmacy, "I'd stay clear of that hill. No fit place to go wandering about. Not after..." And then he trailed off and went back to ringing up my purchase on the antique cash register.

"... the lightning came," I said, finishing his statement. "After the fire."

He glared at me and made an exasperated, disapproving sound.

"You ain't from around here, I know, and whatever you've heard, I'm guessing you've written it off as Swamp Yankee superstition."

"I have a more open mind than you think," I told him.

"Maybe that's so. Maybe it ain't," he groused and looked for the price on a can of pears in heavy syrup. "Either way, I guess I've said my piece. No fit place, and you'd do well to listen."

But I might have only dreamt that, as I might have dreamt the graveyard on the banks of Lake Witalema, and the headstone of a man who died in 1674, and the twisted, charred tree, and...

It doesn't matter.

2.

I LIVE IN THE CITY, A SAFE CENTURY OF MILES SOUTH AND EAST of The Village. When I have work, I am a science journalist. When I do not, I am an unemployed science journalist who tries to stay busy by blogging what I would normally sell for whatever pittance is being offered. Would that I had become a political pundit or a war correspondent. But I didn't. I have no interest in or acumen for politics or bullets. I wait on phone calls, on jobs from a vanishing stable of newspapers and magazines, on work from this or that website. I wait. My apartment is very small, even by the standards of The City, and only just affordable on my budget. Or lack thereof. Four cramped rooms in the attic of a brownstone that was built

when the neighborhood was much younger, overlooking narrow streets crowded with upscale boutiques and restaurants that charge an arm and a leg for a sparkling green bottle of S. Pellegrino. I can watch wealthy men and women walk their shitty little dogs.

I have a few bookshelves, crammed with reference material on subjects ranging from cosmology to quantum physics, virology to paleontology. My coffee table, floor, desk, and almost every other conceivable surface are piled high with back issues of *Science* and *Physical Review Letters* and *Nature* and... you get the point. That hypothetical you, who may or may not be reading this. I'm making no assumptions. I have my framed diplomas from MIT and Yale on the wall above my desk, though they only serve to remind me that whatever promise I might once have possessed has gone unrealized. And that I'll never pay off the student loans that supplemented my meager scholarships. I try, on occasion, to be proud of those pieces of paper and their gold seals, but I rarely turn that trick.

I sit, and I read. I blog, and I wait, watching as the balance in my bank account dwindles.

One week ago tomorrow my needlessly fancy iPhone rang, and on the other end was an editor from *Discover* who'd heard from a field geologist about the lightning-struck hill near The Village, and who thought it was worth checking out. That it might make an interesting sidebar, at the very least. A bit of a meteorological mystery, unless it proved to be nothing but local tall tales. I had to pay for my own gas, but I'd have a stingy expense account for a night at a motel and a couple of meals. I had a week to get the story in. I should say, obviously, I have long since exceeded my expense account and missed the deadline. I keep my phone switched off.

It doesn't matter anymore. In my ever decreasing moments of clarity, I find myself wishing that it did. I need the money. I need the byline. I absolutely do not need an editor pissed at me and word getting around that I'm unreliable.

But it *doesn't* matter anymore.

Wednesday, one week ago, I got my ever-ailing, tangerine-and-rust Nissan out of the garage where I can't afford to keep it. I left The City, and I left Massachusetts via I-493, which I soon traded for I-93, and then I-293 at Manchester. Then, it will suffice to say that I left the interstates and headed east until I reached The Village nestled here between the kneeling

mountains. I didn't make any wrong turns. It was easy to find. The directions the editor at *Discover* had emailed were correct in every way, right down to the shabby motel on the edge of The Village.

Right down to the lat-long GPS coordinates of the hill and the tree and what little remains of the house on the hill. N 43.81591/W -71.37035.

I think I have offered all these details only as an argument, to myself, that I am—or at least was once—a rational human being. Whatever I have become, or am becoming, I did start out believing the truths of the universe *were* knowable.

But now I am sliding down a slippery slope towards the irrational.

Now, I doubt everything I took for granted when I came here.

Before I first climbed the hill.

If the preceding is an argument, or a ward, or whatever I might have intended it as, it is a poor attempt, indeed.

But it doesn't matter, and I know that.

3.

I MAGINE THAT THE VIEW FROM THE CREST OF THE hill was once quite picturesque. As I've mentioned, there's an unobstructed view of the heavily wooded slopes and peaks of Mount Passaconaway, and of the valleys and hills in between. This vista must be glorious under a heavy snowfall. I have supposed that is why the house was built here. Likely, it was someone's summer home, possibly someone not so unlike myself, someone foreign to The Village.

The librarian I spoke of earlier, I asked her if the hill has a name, and all she said was "One Tree."

"One Tree Hill?" I asked.

"One Tree," she replied curtly. "Nobody goes up *there* anymore."

I am quite entirely aware I am trapped inside, and that I am writing down, anything *but* an original tale of uncanny New England. But if I do not know, I will at least be honest about *what* I do not know. I have that

responsibility, that fraying shred of naturalism remaining in me. Whether or not it is cliché is another thing which simply doesn't matter.

I reach the crest of the hill, and just like every time before, the first thing that strikes my eyes is the skeleton of that tree. I'm not certain, but I believe it was an oak, until that night eleven years ago. It must have been ancient, judging by the circumference and diameter of its base. It might have stood here when that man I have yet to (and will not) name was buried in 1674. But I don't know how long oak trees live, and I haven't bothered to find out. It is a dead tree, and all the "facts" that render it *more* than a dead tree exist entirely independently of its taxonomy.

Aside from the remains of the one tree, the hilltop is "bald." The woods have not reclaimed it. If I stand at the lightning-struck tree, the nearest living tree in any direction, is at least twenty-five yards. There is only stone and bracken, weeds, vines, and fallen, rotten limbs. So, it is always hotter at the top of the hill, and the ground seems drier and rockier. There is a sense of flesh rubbed raw and unable to heal.

Like all the times I have come here before, there is, immediately, the inescapable sense that I have entered a place so entirely and irrevocably defiled as to have passed beyond any conventional understanding of corruption. I cannot ever escape the impression that, somehow, the event that damned this spot (for it *is* damned) struck so very deeply at the fabric of this patch of the world as to render it beyond that which is either unholy *or* holy. Neither good *nor* evil has a place here. Neither are welcome, so profound was the damage done that one St. Crispin's Night. And if the hill seems blasphemous, it is only because it has come to exist somewhere genuinely *Outside*. I won't try to elaborate just yet. It is enough to say *Outside*. Even so, I'll concede that the dead tree stands before me like an altar. It strikes me that way every time, in direct contradiction to what I've said about it. Or, I *could* say, instead, it stands like a sentry, but then one must answer the question about what it might be standing guard over. Bricks from a crumbling foundation? The maze of poison ivy and green briars? A court of skunks, rattlesnakes, and crows?

The sky presses down on the hill, heavy as the sea.

From the top of the hill, the wide blue sky looks very hungry.

What is it that skies eat? That thin rind of atmosphere between a planet and the hard vacuum of outer space? I'm asking questions that lead

nowhere. I'm asking questions only because it occurs to me that I have never written them down, or that they have never before occurred to me so I *ought* to write them down.

A cloudless night sky struck at the hill, drawing something out, even if I am unable to describe what that something is, and so I will say this event is the author of my questions on the possible diet of the sky.

Even after eleven years, the top of the hill smells like smoke, ash, charcoal, cinder, all those odors we mean when we say, "I can smell fire." We cannot smell fire, but we smell the byproducts of combustion, and that smell lingers here. I wonder if it always will. I am standing at the top of the hill, thinking all these thoughts, when I hear something coming up quickly behind me. It's not the noise a woman or a man's feet would make. A deer, possibly. An animal with long and delicate limbs, small hooves to pick its way through the forest and along stony trails. This is what I hear, but then, most people *think* they can smell fire.

I take one step forward, and a charred section of root crunches beneath the soles of my hiking boots. The sound seems very loud, though I suspect that only another illusion.

"Why is it you keep coming back here?" she asks. The way she phrases the question, I could pretend I've never heard her ask it before. My mouth is dry. I want to remove my pack and take out the lukewarm bottle of water inside, but I don't.

"It could open wide and eat me," I say to her. "A carnivorous sky like that."

There's a pause, nothing but a stale bit of breeze through the leaves of the trees surrounding the lightning-struck ring. Then she laughs, that peculiar laugh of hers, which is neither unnerving nor a sound that in any way puts one at ease.

"Now you're being ridiculous," she says.

"I know," I admit. "But that's the way it makes me feel, hanging up there."

"What you describe is a feeling of dread."

"Isn't that what happened here, that St. Crispin's Day? Didn't the sky open its mouth and gnaw this hill and everything on it—the tree, the house?"

"You listen too much to those people in the village."

That's the way she says it, *the village*. Never does she say *The Village*. It is an important nuance. What seems, as she has pointed out, dreadful to me is innately mundane to her.

"They don't have much to say about the hill," I tell her.

"No, they don't. But what they do say, it's hardly worth your time."

"I get the feeling they'd bulldoze this place, if they weren't too afraid to come here. I believe they would take dynamite to it, shave off the top until no evidence of that night remains."

"Likely, you're not mistaken," she agrees. "Which is precisely why you shouldn't listen to them."

I wish I knew the words to accurately delineate, elucidate, explain the rhythm and stinging lilt of her voice. I cannot. I can only do my best to recall what she said that day, which, of course, was not the first nor the last day she has spoken with me. Why she bothers, that might be the greatest of all these mysteries, though it might seem the least. Appearances are deceiving.

"Maybe there were clouds that night," I say. "Maybe it's just that no one noticed them. They may only have noticed that flash of lightning, and only noticed that because of what it left behind."

"If you truly thought that's what happened, you wouldn't keep coming here."

"No, I wouldn't," I say, though I want to turn about and spit in her face, if she even has a face. I presume she does. But I've never turned to find out. I've never looked at her, and I know I never will. Like Medusa, she is not to be seen.

Yes, that was a tad melodramatic, but isn't all of this? The same as it's cliché?

"It's unhealthy, returning to this place again and again. You ought stop."

"I can't. I haven't..." and I trail off. It is a sentence I never should have begun and which I certainly don't wish to finish.

"... solved yet? No, but it is also one you never should have asked yourself. The people in the village, they don't ask it. Except, possibly, in their dreams."

"You think the people in The Village are ridiculous. You just said so."

"No, that is not exactly what I said, but it's true enough. However, there genuinely are questions you're better off not asking."

“Ignorance is bliss,” I say, almost mangling the words with laughter.

“That is not what I said, either.”

“Excuse me. I’m getting a headache.”

“Don’t you always, when you come up here? You should stop to consider why that is, should you not?”

I’m silent for a time, and then I answer, “You want me to stop coming. You would rather I stop coming. I suspect you might even need me to stop coming.”

“Futility disturbs me,” she says. “You’re becoming Sisyphus, rolling his burden up that hill. You’re become Christ, lugging the cross towards Calvary.”

I don’t disagree.

“Loki,” I add.

“Loki?”

“It hasn’t gotten as bad as what happened to Loki. No serpent dripping venom, which is good, because I have no Sigyn to catch it in her bowl.” The story of Loki so bound puts me in mind of Prometheus, the eagle always, always devouring his liver. But I say nothing of Prometheus to her.

“It is the way of humans to create these brilliant, cautionary metaphors, then ignore them.”

Again, I don’t disagree. It doesn’t matter anymore.

“But it did happen, yes? There were no clouds that night?”

“It did happen.” She is the howling, fiery voice of God whispering confirmation of what my gut already knew. She has been before, and will be again.

“Go home,” she says. “Go back to your apartment in your city, before it’s too late to go back. Go back to your life.”

“Why do you care?” I ask this question, because I know it’s already too late to go back to The City. For any number of reasons, not the least because I have climbed the hill and looked at the silent devastation.

“There’s no revelation to be had here,” she sighs. “No slouching beast prefacing revelation. No revelation and no prophecy. No **ויסרפו, לקת, אנמ, אנמ** (Mene, Mene, Tekel u-Pharsin) at the feast of Belshazzar.” She speaks in Hebrew, and I reply, “Numbered, weighed, divided.”

“You won’t find that here.”

“Why do you assume that is why I keep coming back?”

This time she only clicks her tongue twice against the roof of her mouth. Tongue, mouth. These are both assumptions, as is face.

“Not because of what I might see, but because of what I’ve already seen. What will I ever see to equal this? Did it bring you here?”

“No,” she says, the word another exasperated sigh.

“You were here before.”

“No,” she sighs.

“Doesn’t it ever get lonely, being up here all alone?”

“You make a lot of assumptions, and, frankly, I find them wearisome.”

It doesn’t even occur to me to apologize. A secret recess of my consciousness must understand that apologies would be meaningless to one such as her. I hear those nimble legs, those tiny feet that might as well end in hooves. There are other noises I won’t attempt to describe.

“Is it an assumption that it is within your power to stop me?”

“Yes, of course that is an assumption.”

“Yet,” and I can’t take my eyes off what’s left of the charred tree, “many assumptions prove valid.”

She leaves me then. There are no words of parting, no goodbye. There never is; she simply leaves, and I am alone at the top of the hill with the tree and what little remains of the house on the hill, wondering if she will come next time, and the time after that, and the time after that. I pick up a lump of four-hundred-million-year-old granite, which seems to tingle in my hand, and I hurl it towards faraway Mount Passaconaway, as if I had a chance of hitting my target.

4.

ONE THING LEADS TO ANOTHER. I AM KEENLY AWARE of the casual chain of cause and effect that dictates, as does any tyrant, the events of the cosmos.

A lightning-struck hill.

A house.

A tree.

A village hemmed in by steep green slopes and the shadows they cast.

A black lake, and a man who died in 1674.

I had a lover once. Only once, but it was a long relationship. It died a slow and protracted death, born as much of my disappointment in myself as my partner's disappointment *in* my disappointment of myself. I suppose you can only watch someone you love mourn for so long before your love becomes disgust. Or I may misunderstand completely. I've never made a secret of my difficulty in understanding the motives of people, no matter how close to me they have been, no matter how long they have been close to me. It doesn't seem to matter.

None of it matters now.

But last night, after I climbed the hill, after my conversation with whatever it is lives alone up there, after that, I made a phone call from the squalid motel room. I have not called my former lover in three years. In three years, we have not spoken. Had we, early on, I might have had some chance of repairing the damage I'd done. But it had all seemed so inevitable, and any attempt to stave off the inevitable seemed absurd. In my life, I have loved two things. The first died before we met, and with my grieving for the loss of the first did I kill the second. Well did I place the second forever beyond my reach.

If I have not already made it perfectly clear, I have no love for The City, nor my apartment, and most especially not for the career I have resigned myself to, or, I would say, that I have *settled* for.

Last night I called. I thought no one would pick up.

"Hello," I said, and there was a long, long silence. *Just hang up*, I thought, though I'm not sure which of us I was wishing would hang up. *It was a terrible idea, so please just hang up before it gets more terrible.*

"Why are you calling me?"

"I'm not entirely certain."

"It's been three years. Why the fuck are you calling me tonight?"

"Something's happening. Something very strange, and I didn't have anyone else to call."

"I'm the last resort," and there was a dry, bitter laugh. There was the sound of a cigarette being lit, and the exhalation of smoke.

"You still smoke," I said.

“Yeah. Look, I don’t care what’s happening. Whatever it is, *you* deal with it.”

“I’m trying.”

“Maybe you’re not trying hard enough.”

I agreed.

“Will you only listen? It won’t take long, and I don’t expect you to solve any of my problems. I need to tell someone.”

Another long pause, only the sound of smoking to interrupt the silence through the receiver.

“Fine. But be quick. I’m busy.”

I’m not, I think. I may never be busy again. Isn’t that a choice one makes, whether to be busy or not? I have, in coming to The Village, left busyness behind me.

I told my story, which sounded even more ridiculous than I’d expected it to sound. I left out most of my talks with the thing that lives atop the hill, as no one can recall a conversation, not truly, and I didn’t want to omit a word of it.

Whether or not each word is of consequence.

“You need to see someone.”

“Maybe,” I said.

“No. Not maybe. You need to see someone.”

We said goodbye, and I was instructed never to call again.

I hung up first, then sat by the phone (I’d used the motel phone, not my cell).

A few seconds later, it rang again, and I quickly, hopefully, lifted the receiver. But it was the voice from the hill. Someone else might have screamed.

“You should leave,” she says. “It’s still not too late to leave. Do as I have said. It’s all still waiting for you. The city, your work, your home.”

“Nothing’s waiting for me back there. Haven’t you figured that out?”

“There’s nothing for you here. Haven’t *you* figured *that* out?”

“I’m asleep and dreaming this. I’m lying in my apartment above Newbury Street, and I’m dreaming all of this. Probably, The Village does not even exist.”

“Then wake up. Go home. Wake up, and you will be home.”

“I don’t know how,” I said, and that was the truth. “I don’t know how, and it doesn’t matter any longer.”

“That’s a shame, I think,” she said. “I wish it were otherwise,” and then there was only a dial tone.

You can almost see the hill from the window of the room. You can see the highway and a line of evergreens. If the trees were not so tall, you *could* see the hill. On a night eleven years ago, you could have seen the lightning from this window, and you could have seen the glow of the fire that must have burned afterwards. Last night, I was glad that I couldn’t see the hill silhouetted against the stars.

5.

THE THREE TIMES I HAVE VISITED THE LIBRARY IN The Village, the librarian has done her best to pretend I wasn’t there. She does her best to seem otherwise occupied. Intensely so. She makes me wait at the circulation desk as long as she can. Today is no different. But finally she relents and frowns and asks me what I need.

“Do you have back issues of the paper?”

“Newspaper?” she asks.

“Yes. There’s only the one, am I correct?”

“You are.”

“Do you have back issues?”

“We have microfiche,” and I tell her that microfiche is perfect. So she leads me through the stacks to a tiny room in the back. There’s a metal cabinet with drawers filled with yellow Kodak boxes. She begins to explain how the old-style reader works, how to fit the spools onto the spindles, and I politely assure her I’ve spent a lot of time squinting at microfiche, but thanks, anyway. I am always polite with her. I do ask for the reel that would include October 26th, 2001.

“You aren’t going to let this go, are you?”

“Eventually, I might. But not yet.”

“Ought never have come here. Can’t nothing good come of it. Anyone in town can tell you that. Can’t nothing good come of prying into the past.”

I thank her, and she scowls and leaves me alone.

I press an off-white plastic button, and the days whirr past my eyes. I have always detested the sound of a microfiche reader. It reminds me of a dental drill, though I’ve never found anyone who’s made the association. Then again, I don’t think I’ve ever asked anyone *how* they feel about the click-click-click whirr of a microfiche reader. One day soon, with so much digital conversation going on, I imagine there will be very few microfiche archives. People pretend that hard drives, computer disks, and the Internet are safer places to keep our history. At any rate, the machine whirs, and in only a minute or so I’ve reached October 26th, the day after the lightning strike. On page four of the paper, I find a very brief write-up of the event at the crest of the hill. One Tree, as it seems to be named, though the paper doesn’t give that name. It merely speaks of a house at the end of an “unimproved” drive off Middle Road, east of The Village. A house had recently been constructed there by a family hailing from, as it happened, The City. The world is, of course, filled with coincidence, so I make nothing of this. I doubt I ever shall. The house was to be a summer home. Curiously, the family is not named, the paper reporting only that there had been three members—father, mother, daughter—and that all died in the fire caused by the lightning. Firefighters from The Village had responded, but were (also curiously) said to have been unable to extinguish what must have been a modest blaze. I will only quote this portion, which I am scribbling down in my notebook:

Meteorologists have attributed the tragic event to “positive” lightning, a relatively rare phenomenon. Unlike far more commonly occurring “negative” lightning, positive lightning takes place when a positive charge is carried by the uppermost regions of clouds—most often anvil clouds—rather than by the ground. This causes the leader arc to form within the anvil of the cumulonimbus cloud and travel horizontally for several miles before suddenly veering down to meet the negatively charged streamer rising up from the ground. The bolt can strike anywhere within several miles of the anvil of the thunderstorm, often in areas experiencing clear or only slightly cloudy skies, hence they may also be referred to as “bolts from the blue.” Positive lightning is estimated to account for less than 5% of all lightning strikes.

The meteorologist in question is not named, nor is his or her affiliation given. I do find it odd that far more space is given to an attempt to explain

the event than to any other aspect of it. Also, it appears to have been cribbed from a textbook or other reference source, and deviates significantly from the voice of the rest of the article. There is, reading over it again and again, the sense that explaining the lightning was far more important to whoever wrote the piece than was reporting the deaths of the family or even the general facts of the case. A single anonymous source is quoted, a resident of High Street (in The Village), as a witness to the lightning strike. There is also mentioned a “terrific booming from the sky” that occurred an hour *after* the strike, and I can’t help but wonder why the paper went to so much trouble to make plain that there was nothing especially peculiar about the lightning, but records another strange incident in passing which it makes no attempt to explain.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” the librarian asks, peering into the small room. I notice, for the first time, the room smells musty. Or maybe it’s the librarian who smells musty.

“I did,” I reply. “Thank you. You’ve been very helpful.”

“I do my job. I do what the town council pays me to do.”

“Then you do it well,” I say, determined to inflict upon her a compliment.

She grumbles, and I leave while she’s busy removing the spool and returning it to its yellow Kodak box. I step out onto the tiny courtyard in front of the library, and it’s just begun raining. Cold drops pepper my face. I stand, staring up into the rain, and consider calling the editor, apologizing, and asking for a second chance. Telling him there really is no mystery here, so it could be a great little piece debunking a rural myth, a triumph of science over the supposedly miraculous. I could return to The City, to my apartment, and wait for other jobs. I would find a way to forget about whatever lived at the top of the hill. I would tell myself I’d imagined the whole affair, mark it up to weariness, depression, something of the sort. The rain almost feels like needles.

AWAKE FROM A NIGHTMARE. I AWAKE BREATHLESS to sweaty sheets. I think I may have cried out in my sleep, but I don't know for sure. Almost at once, I forget most of the particulars of the dream. But it centered on the charred tree. There was something coiled in the branches of the tree, or perched there. It was gazing down at me. A shapeless thing, or very nearly so, clinging somehow to those charcoal branches. I wanted to turn away, to look away, but was unable. It felt the purest spit spilling from it, flowing down the gnarled trunk and washing over me. I have never believed in evil, but the thing in the tree was, I knew, evil. It was evil, and it was ancient beyond any human comprehension. Some of the eldest stars were younger, and the earth an infant by comparison. Mercifully, it didn't speak or make any other sound whatsoever.

I awake to a voice, and I recognize it straightaway. It's the voice from the hill. Near the door, there's the faintest of silhouettes, an outline that is only almost human. It's tall, and begins moving gracefully across the room towards me. I reach to turn on the lamp, but, thankfully, my hand never touches the cord.

"Have you seen enough now?" she asks. "What you found at the library, was that enough?"

She's very near the foot of the bed now. I would never have guessed she was so tall and so extraordinarily slender. My eyes struggle with the darkness to make sense of something I cannot actually see.

"Not you," I whisper. "It hasn't explained you."

"Do I require an explanation?"

"Most people would say so."

If this is being read, I would say most *readers* would certainly say so. There, I *have* said it.

"But not you?"

"I don't know what I need," I say, and I'm being completely honest.

Here there is a long silence, and I realize it's still raining. That it's raining much harder than when I went to bed. I can hear thunder far away.

"This is the problem with explanations," she says. "You ask for one, and it triggers an infinite regression. There is never a final question. Unless inquiry is halted by an arbitrary act. And it's true, many inquiries are, if only by necessity."

“If I knew what you are, why you are, how you are, if there is any connection between you and the death of those three people...” I trail off, knowing she’ll finish my thought.

“... you’d only have another question, and another after that. *Ad infinitum.*”

“I think I want to go home,” I whisper.

“Then you should go home, don’t you think?”

“What was that I dreamt of, the thing in the tree?”

Now she is leaning over me, on the bed *with* me, and it only frightens me that I am not afraid. “Only a bad dream,” she sighs, and her breath smells like the summer forest, and autumn leaves, and snow, and swollen mountain rivers in the spring. It doesn’t smell even remotely of fire.

“Before The Village, you were here,” I say. “You’ve almost always been here,” I say. It isn’t a question, and she doesn’t mistake it for one. She doesn’t say anything else, and I understand I will never again hear her speak.

She wraps her arms and legs about me—and, as I guessed, they were delicate and nothing like the legs of women, and she takes me into her. We do not make love. We fuck. No, she fucks me. She fucks me, and it seems to go on forever. Repeatedly, I almost reach climax, and, repeatedly, it slips away. She mutters in a language I know, instinctively, has never been studied by any linguist, and one I’ll not recall a syllable of later on, no matter how hard I struggle to do so. It seems filled with clinks and glottal stops. Outside, there is rain and thunder and lightning. The storm is pounding at the windows, wanting in. The storm, I think, is jealous. I wonder how long it will hold a grudge. Is that what happened on top of the hill? Did she take the man or the woman (or both) as a lover? Did the sky get even?

I do finally come, and the smells of her melt away. She is gone, and I lie on those sweaty sheets, trying to catch my breath.

So, I do not say aloud, *the dream didn’t end with the tree, I dreamt her here, in the room with me. I dreamt her questions, and I dreamt her fucking me.*

I do my best to fool myself this is the truth.

It doesn’t matter anymore.

By dawn, the rain has stopped.

7.

I HAVE BREAK FAST, PACK, FILL UP THE NISSAN'S TANK, and pay my motel bill.

By the time I pull out of the parking lot, it's almost nine o'clock.

I drive away from The Village, and the steep slopes pressing in on all sides as if to smother it, and I drive away from the old cemetery beside Lake Witalema. I drive south, taking the long way back to the Interstate, rather than passing the turnoff leading up the hill and the house and the lightning-struck tree. I know that I will spend the rest of my life avoiding the White Mountains. Maybe I'll even go so far as to never set foot in New Hampshire again. That wouldn't be so hard to do.

I keep my eyes on the road in front of me, and am relieved as the forests and lakes give way to farmland and then the outskirts of The City. I am leaving behind a mystery that was never mine to answer. I leave behind shadows for light. Wondrous and terrifying glimpses of the extraordinary for the mundane.

I will do my damndest to convince the editor to whom I owe a story—he took my call this morning, and was only mildly annoyed I'd missed the deadline—that there is nothing the least bit bizarre about that hill or the woods surrounding it. Nothing to it but tall tales told by ignorant and gullible Swamp Yankees, people who likely haven't heard the Revolutionary War has ended. I'll lie and make them sound that absurd, and we'll all have a good laugh.

I will bury, deep as I can, all my memories of her.

It doesn't matter anymore.

The Man with the Horn

JASON V BROCK

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1.

H E'S LEAVING...

She always knew when he was heading out. Shortly after he stopped practicing, there would be a great deal of commotion and shuffling on the other side of the thin old walls of the flat, as though someone were moving heavy fixtures around. A few minutes later, she would hear the muffled creak of his front door, and then the decisive slam as it closed. A moment or so after that, she could just make out the faint groan of the aging main staircase as he lumbered down to the gated front entryway.

In all the years she had lived in the modest little studio, she had never seen his face or spoken to him. All the other neighbors on her floor were affable enough; during the holidays, ancient Mrs. Krite-man would leave a tin of fresh-baked goodies in her doorway, or cranky Mr. Golding would brusquely offer to carry a heavy sack of groceries up to her place. Even Juan, the

middle-aged handyman, was unfailingly polite, in spite of his limited English-speaking skills.

Not so her neighbor, Mr. Trinity.

In her twelve-year occupancy, she had yet to meet anyone who had associated with him in a social way, or even spoken with him; he was shadowy, mysterious, aloof.

Once, about five years ago, she managed to catch a glimpse inside his apartment as she was coming up the ramshackle stairs to their gloomy, worn landing. What little she could see appeared spartan, the walls painted black. There was the suggestion of weak lighting, and she just saw a strange endtable with an unusual statue on display. Without her glasses, it was hard to make out, much less comprehend, what she was viewing, and it was only a glance before the door closed, slamming loosely in its paint-chipped frame as he slipped back into his dwelling—as usual, his instrument case in hand, a battered hat pulled down to his jacket collar, his long, shapeless overcoat rustling. She noted then that he seemed a rather tall individual, but had only ever seen him in his duster and hat, and always from a distance. In the protracted silence that followed, the entire odd scenario raised questions in her mind about her neighbor... questions she had put out of her thoughts for some time, but which came rushing back, inspiring in her a vague sense of dread and disquiet concerning his circumstances, and her proximity.

In the ensuing years since, a lot had happened: Her mother had passed on from a prolonged bout of cancer... her brother had been killed in a terrible workplace accident... and she had been relegated to filling her empty hours volunteering at a homeless shelter, existing off the meager disability income she received each month due to a persistent and excruciating neck injury acquired from a car accident. After that she stopped driving, which she deemed not only hazardous, but unnecessary in the neighborhood, and especially as she had no other local relatives; moreover, walking was good exercise. At times she felt isolated, even in her building—an interesting, historic old brownstone with a mix of renters and owners, mostly the elderly and young families starting out—which could be disheartening, but it was an existence of sorts, and at her age, in her physical condition, it was all she could manage. If only she still had Tom, life would be mostly agreeable, but that was not the case: He was taken suddenly three years previous, victim of an undiagnosed heart condition. He fell asleep and just never woke up. For a

time, she prayed for a better life, but her experiences had blunted her faith, lowered her expectations; one should be careful what one prays for, and to whom, she had decided, because there was no guarantee that any of it would come to pass... or in any way that was worth having. No more angels and devils for her; the inspiring tales of faith and redemption of her youth had long ago decayed into bitter cynicism and hard-won, biting realism, which she had come to appreciate. For too long she had held the wrong priorities and only valued what she actually had in hindsight. She recalled a long-forgotten acquaintance once telling her that the biggest downside to getting older was that everyone around you—friends, family, pets—died; that it was the tax paid on living a long life. Considering the other option, she supposed it was better to age, if she could manage it without too much pain and with some measure of decorum. As she approached senior citizen status herself now, she saw the wisdom and sadness of that observation and mentally calculated additional, personal fees: aching joints, failing eyes, lost hope. In her estimation, hearts only served a few purposes at this life stage—heart attacks, heartbreak, heartache.

Outside her door, the landing stairs creaked again, and she looked at the clock: 11:09 P.M. Mr. Trinity had been gone for over three hours as she whiled away the time, lost in her thoughts, absorbed by the past and the pointless regrets of things that could have—even should have—happened but never did and, she suspected now, never would.

Then, the nightly ritual commenced: Mr. Trinity's door slammed shut. This was followed shortly by a heavy scraping sound emanating from his side of the drafty apartment wall. After a moment, he started playing, and his practice would go on for the next several hours. Building in intensity, the tenor of his instrument was mournful, the melody a wailing dirge—a cacophonous mélange of cawing, rasping, weeping shrills and squawks—which seeped through to her, filling her head, filling the night, filling the world with its anguished, doom-laden call....

AFTER SO MANY YEARS, SHE HAD LEARNED TO TUNE out the ominous music issuing from the residence next door. Undeniably, she and Tom had obtained the unit—now paid for with Tom’s life insurance policy, another example of his taking care of her even in death—for a great price because of Mr. Trinity. No one else had wanted to purchase the abode once they heard the uncanny music wafting through the place from next door. The music, and the unnerving history of the domicile, were more than enough to spook most potential homeowners, in spite of the charming layout, the attractive arched doorways, and the decent square-footage. As a result, the apartment had remained on the market for over four years.

“THE PREVIOUS OWNERS SIMPLY DISAPPEARED,” THE REAL estate agent said. *A decent-looking dirty blond, which he had apparently been told a few times too often, he smiled at her before opening the front door with a minor flourish. “Take a look!”*

They had decided to meet at the brownstone after Tom got off from work, but he was running late, as always—one of her pet peeves. Even so, she was excited to see the interior after Tom had described it and the area, which was not only near a small greenbelt, but was convenient to most amenities and even had its own parking space—a rarity. It was the sixth place that they had been to in the past month, but something about it felt better than the others, which were in parts of the city that made her nervous. And it was reasonably close to both of their jobs.

“Wow! I do love the hardwoods,” she said, nonchalantly caressing a newly painted wall. The smell of the paint lingered in the air, subtly merging with a trace of cleaning solutions. “How many bedrooms again?”

“Two. Two bedrooms, one-and-a-half baths, galley kitchen. Gas stoves, for the chef in you!” the agent replied, smoothing his tie and turning on the light in the hallway to the master bedroom. “Great place, great services, restaurants nearby... An outstanding value for this part of the city, near the school—”

“We don’t have any. I mean, no children.” She felt strange saying it aloud. “I decided we weren’t having any.”

“Hello! Sorry I’m late,” Tom said, rushing into the open front door.

“Oh, no worries! We were just starting,” the agent said. “I was running through some of the details.”

“Did you mention the previous owners?” Tom asked, walking over to where they stood in the hall near the bedroom. “Pretty interesting story...”

The agent gave a tight smile. “I did mention that they disappeared—”

“That’s not all, though.”

“No. No, that’s not all; I was going to get to that.” The agent looked down.

She felt the tension in the room elevate. “Get to what?” she asked, an edge in her voice. She dreaded this; she hoped it was nothing stupid. Sometimes Tom did things that just got all over her nerves: dumb ideas, poor choices, crazy notions. If he had not been such a hard worker, she would have found someone else a long time ago. He had even given her another shot when he caught her with her ex-boyfriend, which was more than she would have done. As her mother and brother told her, someone with her intelligence, her looks could get any guy they wanted, so why settle? Maybe guilt... maybe pride... She felt as though something big were going to happen for her one day, and then she could really get on with her life. She deserved better, and she knew that, but he was here, and had never screwed up so bad as to warrant the door. Yet.

“Oh, it’s nothing, really—”

“Well, actually, it’s a very cool story,” Tom interrupted, as was his habit. “It was an older couple, and they were rumored to have mob connections—”

“That,” the agent interjected, “is purely speculative; don’t let that—”

“Right, right—pure speculation. Regardless,” Tom continued, his hands flailing as he spoke. “So they were this older mob couple who had been the owners here for, like, nearly twenty years; so anyway, they were vacationing in Prague, having a good time, and then BAM!” Tom whacked his hands together dramatically. “They’re dragged kicking and screaming across the Charles Bridge, to Prague Castle, and never seen again.”

The room went quiet. The agent sighed loudly. “While it’s true that they did not return, no one knows that they were ‘dragged away.’ They were filmmakers and were doing some research on a recently discovered medieval-era dig near an abandoned city in the Czech Republic. Additionally, they had relatives in Europe, and it’s believed that the couple just decided to stay there. Besides, no one’s even certain that they left the country, or even the city! I mean, there’s no record of them staying in Prague, just some plane ticket purchases. They can’t verify who even used the tickets, or if they were

used. The trail went cold after that, and they left no itinerary beyond going to the Czech Republic.”

“That’s not what I read online, though,” Tom replied. “I read that they had some real money, and were in some deep shit with the Feds, the whole ‘researching-the-ossuary’ thing was a ruse; they were really trying to buy fake identities. I also read it was related to some kinky sex stuff—young girls, live sex shows, crap like that. No one ever heard from them again. That’s why this place went on the market: no one can reach ’em; it’s like they never existed. I read they were troublemakers in the building, too—tried to get a longtime resident evicted so they could take his unit over and expand into it. I think the whole episode adds to the charm of the place, really.”

She looked at Tom, who was smiling, then to the agent, who busied himself nervously eyeing his notes. Finally she asked: “Interesting. Anything else I should know about?”

Then, distantly at first, there was the melancholy sound of a musical instrument—perhaps a French horn or some comparable type of brass—which was soon joined by two, possibly three others of a similar character, forming a mildly dissonant chord that drifted spectrally through the air, building in harmonic complexity, swelling in resonance throughout the room. After a couple of minutes, the playing stopped, the last few phrases of the tune reverberating throughout the unit.

Tom: “Wow! What the hell was that? I’ve never heard anything like it!”

The agent attempted another smile, but his confidence seemed shaken. “That-that’s Mr. Trinity, the next-door tenant. He’s harmless, a recluse...”

A RECLUSE, CERTAINLY, THOUGH IN OTHER WAYS HE was the perfect neighbor: He never complained, never bothered anybody, never had anyone over. Tom drove the bargain hard, and they bought the place, in part because he was so intrigued with Mr. Trinity and the unusual history of the apartment. Tom had always been open to new experiences and enjoyed challenges. It was part of the reason she stayed with him, she realized in retrospect; he had been a musician as well, and even attempted, for a while, to engage their elusive neighbor—knocking on his door, leaving notes, and so on, to no avail. Mr. Golding in particular had warned her husband that his entreaties would be pointless, that Trinity would not be receptive at all, but it was Tom’s nature to try, to reach out to others.

So long as anyone could recall, the cryptic Mr. Trinity had been a staple in the building; even old man Jenkins, the superintendent before he died last year, said that Trinity had been a fixture well before *he* moved in, some thirty years prior. No one in Mr. Jenkins's estimation had set foot in Trinity's place, spoken with him, or even seen his face in all that time. They only knew his name was 'Mr. Ghrâbøel Trinity,' that he practiced playing his horn day and night, and that he left his unit without fail in the evenings for several hours, every day of the year.

After Tom's death, she realized many things, but of course, they were all too late. She was too sad to concern herself with Mr. Trinity and his peculiar habits, but once she was living alone again and the fog of her depression began to lift, she found her curiosity and interest gradually piqued by his odd ways as she so obliquely experienced them.

Then something remarkable occurred: She got a piece of his mail in her box by accident, his name and apartment number clearly scrawled on the front; there was no return address. She stared at it for several minutes. It was the first tangible thing of his that she had ever touched.

She could not resist taking it to her flat.

Once safely in the confines of her home, with Trinity's portentous serenade happening just a few feet beyond the wall, she debated what to do. It might seem awkward to give the letter back now that she had taken it, and she knew he would not answer the door in any case. After an hour of agonizing consideration, she found herself hastily tearing open the water-stained, yellowing envelope, though she knew it was wrong.

Inside, there was a three-page document. The paper was crumbling and smelled of smoke, and the handwritten script was shaky, penned in some alien language, with angular, densely accented letters, and very long words, which were apparently to be read from the right side of the page to the left, and from top to bottom. It resembled no other language she had ever seen, not even her mother's native Russian, and certainly not the Hebrew she had been taught as a child.

Along the bottom third of the pages were several meticulously rendered drawings, but they were smeared, and it was difficult to discern just what exactly they were about. The images looked to be either diagrams, sketches of bizarre plants and animals, or of something else altogether—perhaps a few of each. Curiously, sections of the message were broken up by what appeared

to be a form of musical notation, but not of any type she was familiar with, and nothing she could identify with the help of Tom's old reference books. Even searching the Internet and poring through the stacks at the main library turned up nothing remotely like the notation, illustrations, or language that the missive was encoded in. She filed it away, afraid of what would happen if she threw it out or attempted to give it to him.

The letter brought a certain level excitement to her life, an excitement that had been missing for a long time from her monochrome, increasingly sedate existence; it proved his humanness in a way, and made her feel connected to the outside world again, instead of focusing only on herself, instead of perpetually looking inward. It was then that she began to catch herself noting the timings of Mr. Trinity's comings-and-goings, strangely comforted by the wistful, glum sonorities of his unearthly music. One morning, for the first time in years, she looked into the mirror and noticed her reflection as she got ready. Brushing her hair, she seemed to have more *presence*, more color... Her eyes had a glint of light; her skin was still smooth, still tight for a person her age. Even her frame was more at ease, relaxed, and her weight was good—she had retained a nice figure through all that had happened by exercising, walking everywhere. She smiled for the first time she could remember, and felt a renewed sense of interest—of purpose—in the world.

Over dinner in the evenings, she began to muse that perhaps Mr. Trinity was a professional musician. Her ruminations about his secretive life became increasingly intricate, increasingly detailed, even as her dreams became less interesting, even forgettable. His being a performing musician would certainly explain his continual practicing, his daily excursions into the outside world. *Maybe he's playing gigs... or filling in on recording sessions uptown.*

One day, she vowed to gather up the courage to pay Mr. Trinity a proper visit, perhaps take him a neighborly offering of homemade brownies. Perhaps her feminine wiles could forge some connection between them...

3.

RETURNING HOME FROM THE SHELTER ON A MOONLESS December night, head pounding from a cold she sensed was dragging her immune system down,

she noticed something unusual as she crested the stairs to her landing: R Mr. Trinity's door was open. Just a crack, but enough to see into his dark, dark unit.

She froze in place. The lights on the landing lowered for an instant as a sudden cold gust whistled through the silent hallway, causing Mr. Trinity's front door to move ever so slightly. She looked around; as she pulled her shawl closed about her throat, she found the yarn scratchy, stiff against her skin. Her throat clicked tightly when she swallowed.

Maybe... maybe there's a problem.

She took a short, tentative step forward, heels clicking on the scuffed wooden causeway, unconsciously pulling her purse tighter against her tired body. Suddenly, her vision was narrowed exclusively to the gap between Mr. Trinity's gently wavering door and the shabby doorframe. Her hands felt clammy, her legs heavy; her heart thudded mechanically, unevenly.

After a pause, she stepped closer once more.

"Hello?" Her voice was small, tinny, her mouth dry. The wind whipped outside the building. The lights dimmed, then flared before settling again. Without realizing it, she had walked over and was now at his doorway. She raised her fist to knock, noting that her hand was not only shaking, but that the sixty-year-old skin was slack, dotted with age spots, more wrinkled than she had ever noticed or recalled.

"Hello?" she called out again, louder, and rapped on the dingy wooden door.

No answer.

"Hello? Mr. Trinity? Is everything OK?" The door opened slightly wider as she knocked. Inside, no lights were on; indeed, the black painted walls seemed to pull the light from the landing into the apartment, extinguishing, deadening the weak hallway illumination like a black hole snuffing the energy from a dying star.

"Mr. Trinity? Is everything all right? It's your neighbor."

She stepped into the unit, her shoes clacking on the hardwood of the small foyer. There was a sudden chill in the air, causing her breath to fog, and a sharp smell that she could not quite identify: a top note of copper... a hint of mold... and some other, musky, undertone.

The inside of the place was quite dark. She squinted her eyes, straining against the inky blackness. From what little she was able to see, the layout was completely different from her own residence, and larger; the windows of this corner unit were completely blacked out as well. She stepped forward again, again. With one more step, the feeble outside light fell quickly away; as she moved into the depths of the too-quiet abode, all illumination was smothered by the deep, permeating blackness within.

“Hello? Mr. Trin—” Her balance shifted abruptly, and she lost her foothold after stepping on something soft. Before she could react, she was on all fours, hitting the floor hard, her hands braced against something cool, moist...

A body!

Repulsed, she gently felt around—screaming out when it unexpectedly moved... and answered her scream with one of its own.

She recoiled, a hot stream of acid jetting from her gut to her mouth. Then another person, unseen in the impenetrable gloom, screamed out right beside her. And a third joined, followed by a fourth... Soon there was a horrific chorale of moaning, tortured shrieks filling the pervasive darkness. Her mind flashed on the old couple that used to own her unit: *Were they in here? Tortured for years by Mr. Trinity for trying to have him evicted? Or maybe they were all in a sick partnership... some twisted sex thing as the rumors had reported.*

She leapt up, disoriented, nauseous, and ran. As she hit a wall, the wind was knocked out of her; she felt along its length, at last coming to a closed door, her head pounding in time to her pulse. Behind her, the horrific groaning and thrashing continued, growing in pitch and volume, voices subsiding and joining at different intervals, adding to the density of the cold, thin air as she tried to catch her breath. *I’ve gone the wrong way, I’ve gone deeper into this madhouse!*

She turned the doorknob and pushed the door open—

*dazzled by a staggering, limitless panorama
of vertigo-inducing deep space quintessence:
A primeval, impossibly expanding canopy of twinkling stars,
spiraling galaxies, and flowering nebulae
receding into the void in all directions...*

*Teetering on the threshold of the doorway,
she loses her footing, and is rapidly falling—*

*end over sickening end
through the weightlessness of non-life and non-death,
of animate and inanimate,
the terrible, swarming chorus
slowly replaced by a cavernous, otherworldly thrumming
that pushes all rational thought from her mind...
stunned into insensibility
at the self-organizing chaos of oblivion.*

*Reflexively, she reaches out—
the saliva on her tongue beginning to sizzle
from the vacuum of space; lungs burning
from a lack of oxygen; brain dying of hypoxia—
and tries to control her wildly spinning body.*

*She clutches at where the wall used to be,
her eyes closing as consciousness withers
from her mental horizon...
for a second, a pinpoint of light blooms
in the center of her diminishing awareness,
and she finds a solace she has not known
since before Tom's death—*

When she opened her eyes again, she was lying in a poorly lit hallway that stretched to a vanishing point in the distance. She took a deep breath, eyes watering, and coughed hard, her body drained, aching. Her clothes were torn, damp, and adhered snugly to her stinging skin; her handbag was gone. She touched her face, surprised at how cold it was, even numb in spots; she could barely control the trembling of her hands, which were stiff, tight, frigid. Getting to her feet, she tried to walk, but the floor was uneven, deceptively pitched. As she watched, the corridor hypnotically transmogrified into a vast wasteland of twisted, verdant flora covering prehistoric edifices boasting sinuous, Gaudí-esque forms juxtaposed against jagged monuments—*temples?*—composed of sheer, geometrically impossible gold-leafed angles.

Populated by weird, nonhuman figures—some winged, others not—in disturbing tableaux, the whole site gave the impression of a vanished empire steeped in ostensibly frenzied torment, or perhaps some inscrutable, obscene ecstasy. The bizarre relics, starkly inscribed with oddly familiar, abstract runes and imagery, reminded her of something, and she was overwhelmed with a sudden and profound sadness. She felt trapped, forgotten—lost in her own private German Expressionist film, her own hellish version of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Of course—Mr. Trinity’s letter... That was where she had seen the unusual characters, the plants and creatures, the odd depictions adorning the exterior of the buildings.

At that moment, an ethereal sound—haunting, musical, and also disconcertingly familiar—coasted gradually into her perception across the desolate scene, and she found herself inextricably drawn into this blasted landscape. Was this the ossuary that the couple was researching? Maybe this is hell—or maybe it’s something else... She stepped forward—

She spun around, looking for the source of the garbled exclamation, confused.

<<P’jra!>> The voice was guttural, detached. Again, closer, more insistent: <<P’jra!>>

The eerie music that she heard earlier was mounting, growing louder. The ruins began to dim as she watched, slowly fading into an absolute darkness, just as its grotesque, frozen inhabitants began to stir into hideous life. Abruptly, the strange music ended.

As she watched, her mind pulling pieces of her experiences together, she saw something materialize—first as the hazily radiant outline of a hunched figure within the encroaching nightfall, then little by little gaining solidity as it moved toward her with a resolute determination. Transfixed as the silhouette slowly closed in, she noticed that it appeared to be in pain, as though each movement required tremendous effort, tremendous willpower.

“Mr. Trinity...” Her voice was a strangled whisper; she wanted to say more, to explain, to apologize, but realized it would be pointless: She had trespassed—pried into things that she had no business being involved with, whether she understood them or not—and there would be no turning back.

Once more, softer: <<P’jra.>> Even in the near pitch-blackness of the strange passageway, she could see from the softly glowing aura that shimmered around him in fish-belly iridescent hues that he had his precious

instrument case. Inches away from her he paused, and his towering, shadowy, muscular bulk completely filled her perception. He was nude, she sensed, and his hat was missing. She could see from his outline, which was fearsome, outlandish, that it was an approximation of a human, but closer in form to the figures in the landscape she had seen start to move. His breath was cold, ragged, labored. At last, he stooped forward, revealing a cluster of what seemed to be multiple arms, or perhaps wings, and opened his case. In that singular instant, she became aware of the horrifying screams from the other room once more—the ghastly chorus was still shrilling in anguish, and she instinctively, or perhaps as part of her delusionary state, understood that these could be souls. As he pulled the instrument from its holder, she observed that it too threw off a faint luminosity, a greenish fluorescence that defined its bizarre shape. She had never see what instrument created Mr. Trinity's disturbing music, and was both amazed and revolted by the intricate, mottled swirls of fleshy corkscrews—mapped by tendons, threaded with weakly pulsing veins—that coiled and twisted to create the body of the device: a mucid collage of soft, translucent tubing punctuated with numerous bony prominences. The buttons, inscribed by the odd musical notations from the letter, seemed to be made from rows of large, yellowed teeth, and multiple growths pulsed under its glistening skin, crowding next to many trembling, blinking eyes, which stared from beneath the quivering membranes. Instant to instant, the weird implement appeared solid, then gelid, then solid—the eyes, clouded, deadened, shifting back and forth into positions that brought to her mind distorted, yet familiar faces. Sometimes even people she recognized—her dead mother, father, and brother... Others were strangers, still others were simply half-formed horrors of sickening visage.

She tried to scream, but was muted by horror and disgust. Mr. Trinity pulled the weird apparatus to his face, which for the first time illuminated his features—

And she found the scream buried deep in her chest.

His appearance was little more than a pale, gaunt, expressionless mask, the lips peeled away from the outsized, crooked dentition in an approximation of a rictus. The five deeply sunken eyes formed a perfect inverted triangle in the stretched skin of the face, wetly reflecting the strange, dim glow of the living instrument gripped in his gnarled, arthritic fists. His skeletal proboscis

twitched excitedly on his enormous earless head as Mr. Trinity inched closer and closer, the single massive, blood-colored horn at last visible curling asymmetrically from the top of his denuded cranium.

The din from the screaming choir in the other room seemed to crescendo, then fade from her dying mind; as she backed away from the creature in front of her, she was horrified to comprehend all the terrible lies, delusions, and mistakes in her life that she would never get a chance to undo or correct. Instead of working to improve herself, instead of making the best of her reality, she had coveted and envied; she had marginalized and belittled, and arrogantly claimed to know better. In the end, she had searched for something that was better left unknown, undiscovered. Unfortunately, she had found it. *Am I to become a part of his instrument? Will he collect me now for his endless permutations, his ceaseless practice?*

In the seconds left to her, she thought she heard Tom's voice in the distant screams, blended with the swelling melodies of madness, the pitiful harmonies of Hell that her shattered mind could no longer fully assimilate. She understood now that this was not her heaven or hell, but her eternal limbo. Much as her life had been unlived, so too would her death be unresolved; she would persist in this place, with this being, this creature, this nephilim. She had been found, too, it seemed.

Then, with a strange resolve and an unexpected grace, the man with the horn—who always was, and who always would be—raised the pulsating instrument to his mouth...

And the infinite was ignited.

Hotel del Lago

MOLLIE L. BURLESON

Mollie L. Burleson's fiction and poetry has appeared in such magazines as Lore, Crypt of Cthulhu, and Midnight Echo, and numerous anthologies, including 100 Vicious Little Vampire Stories, 100 Wicked Little Witch Stories, 100 Creepy Little Creature Stories, Horror for the Holidays, Black Wings, and Horrors! 365 Scary Stories. Her literary criticism has appeared in Lovecraft Studies and Studies in Weird Fiction. She lives in Roswell, New Mexico, with her writer husband Don and five cats.

JOE HULL WAS DRIVING IN SOUTHEASTERN New Mexico and was growing very tired, as mile after mile of black ribbon roads stretched out before him. He had gotten off the main drag somehow, and he was nowhere on the map as far as he could tell. That'll teach you to pay more attention, he said to himself.

Up ahead he saw a sign proclaiming the town of Ambrose. Might be a place there to stay for the night. Just a few hours' sleep would enable him to drive on at first light. He entered the town. A few structures, the hotel, and a gas station. Population 68, very small. He didn't see a soul on the streets. It's not all *that* late, he thought.

A big building rose on his right: Hotel del Lago. Strange-looking place, squat and oddly cubic in structure with something approximating a smokestack sticking out of the roof, or more nearly like an upturned funnel. Weird, Joe thought. The hotel and the few buildings surrounding it reminded him of a desert landscape, cacti poking their spines out of the sand. What a peculiar name for a hotel, a building lying like a squashed beetle on the ground in this arid wilderness of rocks and mesquite.

He parked on the semicircle driveway, got out, and approached the building. He could find no door at first and circled the place, searching for an entry. He peered into a window: a room dimly lit and spartan, but neat and orderly. He made another circuit, and as he passed a glass-fronted door it automatically whooshed open.

He entered what he guessed to be the lobby. A large check-in desk, some uncomfortable-looking chairs and sofas, and a black and silent television. The furniture was placed precisely and immovable, uninviting. He walked upon the cold, uncongenial tile floor, his footsteps echoing hollowly.

He hated those stereotypical motels, where kids ran around screaming, TVs blared, everything was plastic, and an occasional drunk reeled by. A dog would bark and sleep was usually broken. But this was no usual motel. The place seemed quiet. Good.

"May I help you?"

Joe turned and looked upon a woman with a pale, pasty face. Her mouth twitched in what could have been taken for a smile.

“Yes,” he answered. “I’d like a room for the night. I’m tired and it’s too late to go further.”

“We happen to have quite a few vacancies,” she responded. Her voice was oddly raspy and liquid-sounding. Her colorless hair, scrunched up in a bun, loosened with her movements, and a few damp strands fell on her wan, unhealthy-looking cheeks. Her eyes bulged in a pop-eyed, questioning glance. Not the greatest looker, thought Joe.

“That’s great. I’m exhausted. Have a long way to drive tomorrow.”

He wondered how old she was. She looked youngish, but her neck was wrinkled and crepey. Probably hasn’t heard about facelifts or special treatments for it in this hick town, he observed.

“Anything much to do around here on a Saturday night?”

“Oh, we find things to do here at times.” She smiled.

“Well, I guess I’m not really looking for things to do. Too tired.”

“As you wish. If you’re as tired as you say, you’ll enjoy it here. A very quiet place. No noise to disturb you. At least none that would bother *you*. Sign here.” She indicated the ledger. “Credit card or cash?”

“Cash.” Joe signed the register and took the key she proffered. Room 101. Close by.

As he left the lobby he glimpsed two men standing by the front door in quiet conversation. As Joe passed, they turned toward him and their dark looks tended to give him the creeps. Further along the hallway he thought he saw a few women in long dresses walking by outside; one of them bore a marked resemblance to the desk clerk. So there *were* other guests? Well, what had he expected? It was a hotel, after all.

He opened the door to his room and passed into a long L-shaped chamber. His first thought was how dreary it was—high-ceilinged, dim, and again, like the lobby, the furniture uninviting.

He sat on one of the chairs and tried to relax before sleep. Nope, it wasn’t working. Wait a minute, hadn’t he seen a bar on the way to the room? Just what he needed to relax, a nice, cool whiskey and soda. Or maybe just a beer.

He left his room and headed for what he thought might be the bar. It was. Dark and dank, smelling of beer and something else. There was a lone customer sitting on a stool, and Joe decided to sit down next to the old man.

A bartender hovered just out of the glow of the one neon light in the bar and asked him what he wanted.

“Beer.”

The old man turned to Joe and nodded. He seemed to be having a mixed drink.

“Hi,” Joe said, nodding in like manner. “You live around here?”

The man nodded and mumbled, “I wasn’t born here, though.”

“So this is the local watering hole, I gather?”

“Nothing much to do here except have a drink once in a while,” the old man said. “Passes the time.”

He looked to be in his sixties, heavyset with grizzled gray hair and the look of a lush about him. Joe took a swig of beer. Although the man didn’t seem to want to talk much, Joe drew him out and asked about the town.

“Why did they name this place after a lake? No lake around here that I can see. Strange.”

The old man inched his shoulders up and down.

“Well,” Joe added, “if you live here you would know.”

The man didn’t reply and kept his face buried in his drink. They sat in silence for a while and then the man croaked in his gin-soaked voice, “It’s more than the name is strange.”

“What do you mean? The town? The people? What?”

“Look around. You’ll see.”

The old man leaned toward Joe and started to speak further, but a sound came from a back room and the man sucked up the last of his drink, slumped off the stool and limped out the door, looking back at Joe one last time.

JOE RETURNED TO HIS ROOM, UNDRESSED, AND GOT into bed. The sheets were clean and the mattress not too hard, but, tired as he was, he couldn’t seem to fall asleep. Though the ceilings were high, he felt claustrophobic and had a vague sense of repulsion. Nothing he could put his finger on, but something wasn’t *quite* right.

Time passed. He looked at the bedside clock. 2:30 A.M. Did I sleep? Growing even more restless he arose and went to the window. What the old man said or half hinted at was disturbing him and he couldn’t quite figure out why.

He lifted up a corner of the curtain and peered out. Dark, very dark, yet a gibbous moon imparted a wan light to the scene. In the distance he thought he saw movement, and he peered even more closely. It *was* movement, of a sort. The town's villagers? The ones he saw by the door or out on the path, perhaps? But why the gathering? Surely not one of those religious cults?

He hurriedly dressed, slipped out of the room quietly, and headed for the back exit. He hoped no alarm would sound as he pushed open the door. No—it was quiet. Good. He walked down a gravel path and headed for what he thought he'd seen from his room. There were a couple of shacks behind the hotel, and it was toward there that he guided his footsteps. He reached one of the buildings and pressed himself tightly against the wall and peered around the edge. He couldn't believe his eyes. A body of water lay nearby and before it stood vague forms, swaying and moving their hands in prayer-like supplication. The townspeople? For what purpose?

The water was black, and he thought he saw ripples upon its surface. But there was no wind. Odd. The movements increased rapidly and the waves in the water grew larger. Something was headed for the shore. Good Lord, what was happening? A strange chant rose from the tossing figures, weird sounds oddly like the word *ruyeh*. What did it all mean?

Then, a woman—could it be the clerk?—threw something into the roiling waters, something that gleamed from the wan light of the moon.

The thing in the water neared the shore and headed for the object.

It was then that Joe dashed away from the shack and fled in blind terror to the hotel. He ran into his room, grabbed his suitcase and car keys, and rushed out the front door, never looking back. He tossed his things onto the front seat, turned the key in the ignition, and without one backward glance sped away from the horrid place.

He drove like a soul possessed and didn't stop until he could see the sky in the east turn a lighter shade of gray. Seeing a sign for a town up ahead, he pulled off the road and drove around until he found a state police barracks. He banged through the doors and went up to the desk.

The sergeant looked up. "Hey mister, you look all shook up. What's the matter?"

"It's that damn town up the road, you know, Ambrose."

"Ambrose? You mean that place about fifty miles north of here?"

"Yeah, the town with the lake."

“Lake? There’s no lake anywhere near here. It’s the desert, ya know.”

“That’s what I thought too. But I stayed at the Hotel del Lago last night and saw weird goings on.”

“Boy, I’m glad *I* didn’t stay there. Nothin’ there but old ramshackle buildings and mesquite and tumbleweeds and rattlesnakes. What in hell are you saying?”

“But I *did* stay there. I did see people dancing by the lake. And some *thing* crawling out of it.”

“Mister, what were you drinking?”

“I wasn’t drinking!”

“Then you’re nuts!”

Joe and the sergeant kept on arguing back and forth until Joe finally admitted that maybe he had been seeing things. He figured that since the sergeant was so sure, maybe they’d put him in the lockup overnight if he kept on arguing.

The day was well established when Joe said goodbye to the officer, got into his car, and headed north, back to Ambrose.

In a short while he neared the town. He stopped the car and got out. Hotel del Lago was gone. All that remained were bricks and wood and sand. He walked back to where he remembered the shacks, but they no longer existed. Crumbled to debris. And the lake? Dry as a bone out there. Not even damp soil. Nothing.

Nothing except for one thing. At what he had thought had been the shore, one footprint remained, and—something else.

Something bright and shiny and golden. Inscribed on its surface were rune-like characters, with an image of some creature also etched upon it. The creature from the lake. It *had* been there, *had* been swimming in that black water, for not only the object lay on the stones, but the thing’s impression was there, too, fossil-like in the sand. It was long and bloated and rugose, and it had no place in this world.

Waller

DONALD TYSON

Donald Tyson is a Canadian writer who lives in an old farmhouse in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, with his wife, Jenny, an American bulldog named Ares, and a white Siamese cat named Hermes. Best known for his many nonfiction books on various aspects of the Western esoteric tradition, Tyson is the author of Alhazred (Llewellyn, 2006), a novel about the life of the writer of the Necronomicon, and more recently of The Ravener and Others (Avalonia, 2011), a collection of horror stories featuring the doings of Elizabethan mage Dr. John Dee and his friend, the alchemist and necromancer Edward Kelly.

1.

LOU O'BRIAN CUPPED HIS HANDS AROUND THE wooden match and waited for it to flare through the head to the wood, then applied the flickering flame to the tip of his cigarette. He drew the smoke into his lungs and held it for a moment with his eyes closed, dropped the match, and leaned his shoulders against the brick wall of the hospital. Dr. Goldman's words were still in his head, like the lyrics of a song he couldn't forget.

"I'm sorry, Mr. O'Brian, there's no easy way to tell you this, but the test was positive. That means you have a cancerous tumor on your liver. There's more bad news, I'm afraid. The cancer has spread throughout the rest of your body and is inoperable. It's terminal."

The doctor's brown eyes were filled with compassion when he said it. O'Brian just sat there, numb.

"By terminal you mean I'm going to die."

"I'm afraid so, yes."

"How much time do I have?"

The doctor gave an apologetic shrug.

"If you want my best guess, I'd say about three months. The cancer is aggressive."

"There's nothing you can do?"

"I'm afraid not. Any therapy we might give you would be ineffective and would only make you feel much worse over the weeks you have left."

"Months," O'Brian reminded him. "You said months."

"Of course, months. But you realize that toward the end, your quality of life will decline dramatically."

"How many good weeks do I have?" O'Brian asked, his throat dry.

Goldman would not give him a number. He said that was a subjective judgment. However, O'Brian should waste no time in getting his financial affairs in order. Goldman folded his hands on the top of his desk.

"There are treatments we can give you that will make you more comfortable, but they won't change the outcome."

"I understand."

"Do you want me to break the news to your wife?"

O'Brian thought about it.

"Thanks, no, I'll tell her. Thank you."

Now here he was, a walking dead man. Thirty-seven years old, a chartered accountant, with a wife who liked to shop, an eleven-year-old daughter in need of new braces, a dog with a skin condition, and a house in the suburbs that wasn't paid for. His life insurance policy should just about cover the medical bills, pay for the funeral, and pay off the mortgage. Cindy would have to get a job. Maybe he could help her find something before he got too sick.

He flicked the butt of his cigarette onto the asphalt of the hospital entrance and pushed away from the wall. The wind was cold, the sky a featureless silver-gray. The perfect day to be told he was going to die.

Well, what of it? Everyone dies. Death was the great equalizer that made a president or a king no better than a homeless bum. The only difference between him and those other gray-faced wage slaves who hurried along the sidewalk was that he knew approximately when it was coming.

A drop of rain cut an icy slash across his cheek. He turned up the collar of his topcoat and looked reflexively at his watch.

I should go home and tell Cindy the bad news, he thought.

Instead, he started to walk along the sidewalk, following three college girls who chattered and laughed as one of them tried to open her umbrella against the wind. They were dressed in bright colors, the only spot of brightness in the blurring grays and browns of the city. He was acutely aware of how drab and impersonal the office buildings looked as he passed them, and of the defensive hostility in the faces of most of the men and women walking in the opposite direction.

He found himself in an unfamiliar bar, getting mildly drunk on Scotch. No one tried to talk to him. The other patrons seemed to sense that he had received bad news. A few people cast him sympathetic looks, but nobody spoke. He sat on the bar stool in his private bubble of bleak despair.

A few sentences, and his entire life was ended. Just like that. He would join the swelling ranks of those who had died from cancer. There seemed to be more of them every year. It was almost as though cancer was trying to crowd out all the other forms of death and take their place. For a while he wondered who would get his job. Then he spent some time wondering who would get his wife.

The mild drunk he had going made him sentimental. When at last he made his way back into the street, tears of self-pity welled up in his clear blue eyes. Full night had fallen. It was raining, but not hard. The rain drove most

pedestrians off the sidewalks. The few who remained hurried past him, anxious to get into their cars and taxis, or into their doorways. He felt the same sense of being separate and apart from the human race that he had experienced in the bar.

His mind void and gently spinning from the Scotch, he crossed the street and entered an alley. All he wanted was a moment or two of privacy so that he could gather his strength and stop his pointless tears.

There is nothing in this dreary world more useless than tears, he thought. Yet we all cry.

The empty alley looked surprisingly clean. At its end was a closed loading bay for the trucks that must back into it during business hours. On one brick wall some budding graffiti artist had used spray paint to draw what resembled a black tree, only the branches of the tree were tentacles that writhed out on all directions. Wrapped in the ends of some of the tentacles were little stick figures of human beings that appeared to be shrunken in on themselves and sucked dry of life. O'Brian realized that the tree was feeding on them. Creepy, he thought.

He pressed closer to the opposite wall so that the overhang would protect him from the rain, and drew out his pack of cigarettes. Taking a wooden match from his pocket, he struck it on the bricks and lit the cigarette, then leaned back against the wall to enjoy it.

He fell through the wall.

2.

THERE WAS A KIND OF DISCONNECT. FOR A FEW seconds he could not tell how much time had passed, or where he was. He rolled to a sitting position and realized he was sitting on a street. It had rained recently—the bricks of the street were still wet. They were set in a herringbone pattern and were larger than regular bricks and made of a kind of blue stone.

He looked around in confusion. This wasn't the alley. That had been paved with asphalt. This street was narrow and sloped, and bent to the side around some odd-looking cigar store. The street lights were dim and yellow. As he stared at one of them, it flickered.

He reached up and felt the back of his head. To his relief, there was no bump and no blood.

It must be the cancer, he thought. It's already starting to fuck with my life.

He pushed himself to his feet and stood swaying. The Scotch was still with him, so he could not have been out for long. He wandered over and touched the cast-iron lamppost. It was old-fashioned. The whole street looked old-fashioned, he realized, like something out of an old black-and-white movie. Holding the iron post for balance, he looked up at the lamp. It flickered as he watched. He could hear a faint hiss coming from it.

Gas. It was a gas light.

When had the city started using gas streetlights? And why was it so quiet? He realized that he must have wandered in an unconscious condition to some other part of the city—maybe down by the waterfront, where they were restoring some of the streets to the way they had looked a century ago, in the hope of drawing the tourist trade. Sure, that must be it. What other explanation could there be? The cancer had made him black out. He'd better get his ass home, Cindy would be looking for him.

He started to walk down the hill, only because it was easier than walking uphill. The street was dirty. In fact, it was the dirtiest street he had ever seen. A kind of black soot clung to the walls and coated the bricks beneath his feet. Scattered here and there were small heaps of what looked like horseshit. In the gutters at the edges of the sidewalks, torn pages from old newspapers and ragged bits of brown bags fluttered in the breeze.

A stench arose from a pile of crumpled papers when he nudged it with the toe of his shoe, and he stepped back with his hand over his mouth and nose. A dead dog lay near a storm drain grate, its face and belly eaten by rats. The white skull of the little animal showed at the edges of its ragged fur. Maggots crawled over its intestines. From inside the grate he heard the angry squeaks of the vermin, annoyed that he had disturbed their meal.

As he approached a corner, some of the tension left his shoulders. The street that crossed the one he was on was wider and busier. He heard the voices of pedestrians. From some open doorway, piano music floated on the night air. A horse and carriage was drawn up at the curb near the corner.

He turned the corner and saw a group of young men and women at the same moment they saw him. They stopped talking amongst themselves and paused to stare at him. He had only a moment to register that the two women were wearing long dresses that brushed the bricks of the sidewalk, and that the three men had on bowler hats and white spats covering the tops of their shoes.

"It's a Waller!" one of the men yelled.

He looked excitedly around and took a step into the street, still pointing his finger.

“Waller!” he shouted.

One of the women squealed with excitement. The man beside her drew something from his pocket and opened it. The gas light above them glinted along its edge. O’Brian realized that it was a folding pocketknife.

All five of them rushed toward him. From the other side of the street he heard a woman cry out.

“Waller! It’s a Waller!”

Some instinct for survival took over. O’Brian didn’t try to talk. He didn’t even think. He just turned and ran.

Ahead of him, he saw several pedestrians moving to cut him off and darted down the nearest side street. In spite of his cancer he was in good physical condition. He had worked out at the company gym five days a week during his lunch hours. He was able to put some distance between himself and the growing mob that pursued him.

He realized that he was close to the river. The buildings took on a more rundown look. Some of them even appeared abandoned, but the doors he tested were all locked shut. He turned a corner and ran along a boardwalk that edged a kind of foul-smelling boat canal with decaying buildings along either side.

An old woman in a green knitted shawl stood on a doorstep hunched over a corn broom, which she used to sweep dust out the open door and onto the boardwalk. Like everything else since he had come back to his senses, she seemed wrong in almost indefinable ways. Her long dress looked at least a century out of fashion and her gray hair was piled up in a tight bun on the top of her head.

She stared at him over her broom as he stood looking at her, and her wrinkled eyes widened. The one on the left was milky-white. She extended her hand and beckoned him to her with urgent little waves of her fingers.

“Quickly, my son, we’ve got to get you out of sight.”

Her voice had an accent to it that O’Brian had never heard in his life. It sounded a bit like Scottish or Irish, but was neither one of them.

From behind on the street he had just left, the shrill cries of the mob drew closer. He hesitated for no more than a moment, then hurried forward. She put her gnarled hand on his shoulder and pushed him through her doorway, then shut the door behind them and turned an iron latch to lock it. The old woman guided him around the corner of an archway into a narrow hall.

“Wait here. If they try to come in, you slip yourself out the rear door, and then later on you can come back to me.”

O’Brian nodded and withdrew himself further into the shadow of the unlit hall. The front room held a single oil lamp burning on a table. She went to it and turned down the wick, but did not put it out.

Within seconds the feet of the mob thundered past on the boardwalk. O’Brian made out exclamations of frustration and several curses before they went out of hearing. The old woman sat in a tapestry-covered armchair beside an iron woodstove, which was not burning at present, and took up knitting from a basket. She did not even turn her head to look toward him.

Five or six minutes passed. Then there came the sound of heavy footsteps outside the door. A fist pounded on the doorframe.

“Old woman! Are you in there?”

O’Brian glanced toward the far end of the hall, but it lay in total darkness. Now was not the time to be feeling his way down a strange hall.

“What do you trouble me for?” the woman said in a querulous tone. “Go away.”

“We’re running down a Waller,” the voice said.

“What’s that to me?” she demanded from her chair.

“Did you see a man run past your door about five minutes ago, or didn’t you?”

“I did not,” she said emphatically. “Now piss off.”

“You crazy old witch,” the voice said.

O’Brian heard him stomp away in anger from the doorstep and along the boardwalk.

The old woman let another ten minutes go by, then set down her knitting in the basket and, with a grimace of effort, pressed herself to her feet using the arms of the chair. Glancing suspiciously at her front window, she went through the archway to the hall, where she could not be seen by anyone who might happen to peer through the crack in the curtains.

“We’ll let them have time to give up the chase, and then I will fix you something hot to eat,” she told him.

“Whoever you are, thank you.”

“My name’s Maggie Spry,” she said. “Everyone calls me Maggie.”

O’Brian told her his name.

“Why are those people chasing me? Are they all crazy?”

She studied at him keenly from her good eye, which was light gray in color. He tried not to stare at the milky cataract covering the other one.

“Did you attend to what they called you?”

At first O’Brian didn’t understand what she was talking about.

“You mean that word they used? Waller?”

“It means nothing?”

He shook his head slowly. She put her hand on his shoulder.

“Come to the kitchen. I see that I have much to tell you.”

3.

“I WILL TELL YOU WHAT THE PRIESTS SAY TO US ON Monday morning.”
O’Brian looked up from his bowl of split-pea soup.
“Monday? Don’t you mean Sunday?”

Maggie chuckled.

“The things in our world are not like the things in your world.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Then listen,” she said, patting the air with her hand to silence him.

He took another spoonful of the hot soup. By this time the Scotch had left his system, and he felt chilled and exhausted.

“The priests say there are two worlds, side by side, like this.” She clenched her fists and held her forearms up so that they touched along their edges, then parted her arms and looked through them at him solemnly. “One of them is the real world that has always been, and the other is a world that was made by the gods. You came from the other world, the world that isn’t real.”

He blinked at her, wondering if she might be insane.

“My world seemed real enough.”

She nodded.

“The gods made it that way, to deceive all of you who dwell there. You think it is real, and you know nothing of this world, the real world.”

If he contradicted the old woman, she might become angry. He decided to humor her.

“Why did the gods make my world?”

“For the bean that grows on your liver,” she said.

A chill tingled up O’Brian’s spine and settled at the base of his neck.

“Excuse me?”

“They say the gods made your world to be the plantation for their life seed. It won’t grow here, so they made a special place where it would grow.”

“Life seed,” he repeated numbly.

“That’s what they call the little thing growing out of your liver.” She peered at him keenly through her good eye. “You know about it, don’t you?”

He thought of his tumor and nodded.

She opened a drawer in the kitchen table and took out a clay pipe with a long stem. He watched her fill it with tobacco and light it by inverting it over the glass oil lamp. When she had puffed a series of blue balls of smoke across the table, she continued.

“The gods sow the life seeds throughout your world, but even though they take root in many of your kind, they only grow true in a precious few of you.”

“This life seed? Do you mean cancer?”

“I don’t know that word.”

“You don’t know what the word cancer means?”

She shook her head, puffing on the stem of the pipe.

“There is no cancer in this world?” he asked again in incomprehension.

She shrugged her shoulders beneath her knitted shawl.

“What happens, then, when the seed grows true?” he prompted her. It was some kind of warped fairy tale, but she appeared serious.

“When the seed ripens, you fall into our world, and we catch you and cut the life seed off your liver, and sell it to the priests.”

“You cut it off,” he repeated, unable to believe what he was hearing. Then he remembered the knife in the hand of one of the men chasing him.

“You are a Waller, and what you have inside your body is the most precious thing in this world. A single seed is enough to keep an entire family in luxury for the rest of their days.”

“Why do you call me a Waller?”

Her laughter was disturbingly close to a cackle.

“You fall through the wall between our two worlds.”

“I’m called a Waller, because I fall through the wall?”

She nodded, puffing contentedly on her pipe.

“It’s the only way the life seeds can get from your false world to our true world. The priests cannot go into your world to harvest them. Not even the gods can enter the Plantation.”

“Plantation?”

“That’s what the priests sometimes call the false world. Because it grows the life seeds.”

O’Brian realized his soup had gone cold, and he set down his spoon in the bowl. He shook his head, trying to comprehend what the old woman had told him. It was the ravings of a maniac.

“How could this go on, yet no one in my world know anything about it?”

She smiled around the stem of the pipe.

“Are you so sure nobody in your world knows?”

He remembered the strange image of the black tree on the alley wall, and of the shrivelled bodies that lay in the coils of its tentacles. Why was he thinking of it? With a twinge of anger, he pushed it out of his mind.

“If people were just falling through the wall between worlds, it would get noticed.”

“Don’t people ever disappear in your world?”

O’Brian stared at her, thinking of all the milk cartons with all the tiny faces.

“These Wallers—are they ever children?”

She nodded.

“Walers come in any age, though now that you mention it, when I was a girl, not too many were children, but it seems that more children fall through every year.”

The enormity of her words crept upon him like a lengthening shadow.

“You mean the people who vanish from my world without a trace, and are never heard from again, are all Wallers?”

She shrugged.

“I don’t know about all of them, but some of them, maybe most of them. They fall through, just as you did, and we harvest their life seeds.”

He swallowed, his throat dry. The old woman grunted and got up from the table. Going to the sink, she worked a hand pump and caught the spurt of water that came from it in a tin cup, then brought the cup back to the table and sat down once again.

“Drink. It’s good water, drink it.”

He gulped half the water from the cup.

“What do the gods do with the seeds?”

“Nobody knows. The priests pretend that they know, but they are all liars. The priests pay in gold for freshly harvested seeds—the fresher they are, the better they pay.”

And now for the big question, he thought.

“Why are you helping me?”

She pursed out her lower lip with a stubborn expression.

“Why should I kill for the priests? I don’t need money. What good does money do an old woman? Anyway, I had a son once. You look like him around the eyes.”

O’Brian wondered if he should leave this talkative madwoman and risk his luck on the streets. It must be after midnight, and most of the mob would have gone home. She seemed to read his thoughts.

“You wouldn’t get two blocks. It’s your strange clothes that give you away. Anyone who sees you will know you for a Waller.”

“Then I need new clothes.”

She got stiffly to her feet.

“First things first. You need sleep. You can use my son’s bed. Tomorrow morning I’ll find you some of my son’s old clothes. They should fit you. I’ve even got a pair of his best Monday shoes.”

O’Brian stood. His legs trembled with fatigue. He had not realized until then how exhausted he was. If he didn’t sleep, he would fall over where he stood.

“How can I thank you?”

“No need, no need.”

He followed her up the stairs. In the first bedroom there was a neatly made poster bed and a double bureau, both of pine, along with a tall wardrobe of walnut.

“I’ll leave the lamp with you,” Maggie said, setting the oil lamp on the bureau. “I don’t need it. I know this house blindfolded.”

She closed the door behind her when she left. He went quickly to it and was relieved to find that it had no lock. He did not want to be locked in, no matter how charitable the old woman might be.

4.

THE DARKNESS WAS ALMOST ABSOLUTE. A FAINT SKY glow found its way between the lace-edged curtains, which he had neglected to draw shut before going to bed. He lay staring at the unseen ceiling, his body strangely tense. He realized he was holding his breath and let it out with a long sigh.

Was there something beside the bed? He squinted through the darkness, but the shadow, if it was really there, refused to resolve itself. He remembered the strange words of the old woman and shook his head on the pillow with a rueful smile. Whatever had happened to him, he was not in another world. That was impossible. The cancer must be affecting his mind. When it got light he would get out of this place without waking the old woman and find his way back to the hospital. Maybe Dr. Goldman could give him something to prevent him from passing out and seeing things.

It was the old woman's foul breath that betrayed her. O'Brian smelled her exhalation as it brushed his lips and reached up in time to grasp the hand that held the knife before its edge touched his throat. She was much stronger than he would have believed possible, but he fought for his life, and despite the unfortunate news he had received from Goldman, he discovered that he very much wanted to keep on living.

The two of them ended up on the floor beside the bed, entangled in the blankets. He managed to get his elbow into the old woman's throat as he struggled to pry the knife loose from her powerful fingers. Something crunched, and she began to wheeze and gurgle. After around a minute her arms went slack, and he tore the knife from her lax hands. With a feeling of dread in his heart, he scrambled to his feet in the darkness and cast off the blankets that still clung around his legs. He stood listening, holding his breath, the knife at the ready in his hand, but there was no other sound from the floor or from the dark hallway.

He still had matches in his pocket. He found the solitary wooden chair with his suit draped over it and got out a wooden match, then used it to light the wick of the lamp on the bureau. What he saw made his stomach roll. Old Maggie lay grotesquely dead in a tangle of blankets, staring up at him with her one good eye as though in accusation, her tongue poking from her mouth. Her hands were held up in front of her face defensively. They reminded O'Brian of the crooked talons of a hawk.

As he looked, a low gurgle came from her mouth that almost stopped his heartbeat. He realized it must be some kind of death rattle and forced himself to relax. He had to think. He had just killed a woman. True, she had tried to kill him first, but there was nothing to prove that. If the insane mob of the night before had chased him without a reason, they had a very good reason now.

Was any of what dead Maggie had told him true? He thought about it and shook his head. It was the ramblings of a senile old woman. It must be.

Even so, while waiting for the first light of dawn, he found some of her son's clothes and put them on. He even went so far as to put on underwear and socks from a lower drawer of the bureau, so that his disguise would be complete. He knew the old woman had talked crazy talk, but for some reason he could not bring himself to ignore her words. It would do no harm to play along with the story, he rationalized to himself. In any case, his suit was soiled and he needed clean clothes. The son's churchgoing leather shoes fitted his feet surprisingly well.

He didn't leave the house at first light, reasoning that if he was the only person on the streets, he would draw attention to himself. Instead he waited until the sounds of passing feet on the boardwalk began to filter into the silent downstairs sitting room. When there was a break in the foot traffic, he slipped out the door.

There was a rat hole in the corner of the side board of the step. Glancing left and right, he slipped into it his watch and wallet, pushing them as deep as his elbow. Thankfully, nothing bit him. He couldn't leave the wallet in the house or his name might be linked to Maggie's corpse, but he couldn't carry it in his pocket in case he was stopped and searched.

He made his way along the canal toward the nearest street. He tried to look casual and unhurried as he worked his way up the hill and back into the heart of the city.

Wherever he was, he was not in the city he remembered. The unfamiliar streets had a vintage look that resembled the period shortly before the introduction of the automobile. Wagons and carriages rattled by, but most of the traffic was on the sidewalks. If anything made him wonder whether he really might be in some other world, it was the sight of all these people walking instead of driving. None of them were fat, he noticed. Their clothes were just strange enough to be unsettling. The colors were not as bright as they should have been. Nobody was wearing tennis shoes or jeans. The women had on modest dresses that almost dragged on the bricks, or long skirts and white blouses, and all the men without exception wore hats.

There were little differences that jumped out from the drab background. A boy about eighteen years of age passed him riding a bicycle that was not driven by pedals that moved on cranks in a circle, but by levers that went up and down as he put his weight on them. On one corner, a dirty little street urchin was hawking newspapers that were the wrong shape and color—instead of broad white rectangles they were yellow and fan-folded in narrower strips.

I must be hallucinating, he thought, trying not to gawk and draw attention to himself. Could what the old woman had told him be true? He shook his head in answer to his own question. Which was more likely, that he had gone crazy from the stress of finding out that he was dying of cancer, or that he had fallen through a wall between two realities? Cancer, that was another thing—the old woman had not known the word cancer. And the priests paid for cancerous tumors. That was too much of a coincidence. The little speech from Dr. Goldman must have caused a mental breakdown, and he was dreaming all this.

But it seemed so real! He could feel the grit of ashes under the leather soles of his new shoes, and smell the smoke from coal stoves. The breeze on his face felt plausible enough. He looked up and saw gray clouds creeping across the sky behind the cornices of old-fashioned buildings, none of which was taller than ten or twelve stories. Between the clouds were patches of blue sky.

Raised voices drew his attention to the sidewalk in front of a theatre beneath a projecting awning, where a young woman lay on her back with her hands raised. A crowd of five or six men and women had gathered around her, and more were running across the street.

“Waller! It’s a Waller!” a woman beside him said with excitement.

She dropped her brown shopping bag onto the sidewalk and hurried forward.

O’Brian followed in a kind of trance, mesmerized by the scene and with a sense of horror rising within him.

“I saw her first,” a man said harshly.

He waved a knife in the air, and the people around him backed off a step. It had a long, thin blade, like the kind of knife used to fillet fish.

O’Brian saw that the girl lying on her back was young, probably no more than thirteen or fourteen years old. She wore a short skirt with a bright red stripe across it and white tennis shoes. Her hair was dyed purple. What really sickened him was the realization that she had metal braces on her teeth. She reminded him of his daughter, Anne.

“Help me harvest her, Jack. I’ll give you part of it,” the man with the knife said.

Another man knelt quickly and began to rip the clothes off the girl, while the crowd milled around with excitement. When he couldn’t get them off fast enough, he dug into his pocket and flicked open a knife, then used it to cut the remaining clothes away. Everyone in this place must carry a knife, O’Brian thought.

The girl began to scream. She thrashed around and tried to writhe away, but the second man held her down with his knee on her chest between her small breasts, her wrists locked together in his hands against the sidewalk. The first man knelt and, with an expert motion of his knife, cut into the white side of her abdomen. He felt around inside the gash and extended his blood-stained knife into the wound, then withdrew something and held it up in triumph.

“Lucky bastard,” one man next to O’Brian muttered with disgust.

He looked at O’Brian. There was a nasty cold sore on his upper lip that O’Brian found himself staring at, the way a bird stares at a snake.

“Yeah, lucky,” he said faintly, trying to imitate the accent of the old woman.

A drop of sweat ran down the side of his nose. He resisted the reflex to wipe it away. The other man held his gaze for a moment, then turned back to the bloody scene on the sidewalk. The friends of the first man with the knife were gathered around him, congratulating him and laughing with excitement. He had wrapped his prize in a white handkerchief and cradled it close to his chest, his lean face twisted in an expression of possessive ecstasy. The other spectators began to move slowly away, casting envious glances back at the nearly naked, bloody corpse, which still wore its tennis shoes but little else.

5.

WALKING AT A CASUAL PACE PAST THE BODY AND THE scattered clothes that lay around it, O’Brian turned into the first empty alley he came to and went behind some oak barrels to throw up. There wasn’t much in his stomach. He spat out the acid taste and wiped his lips on the palm of his hand, then transferred the wetness to the side of his pants. He found himself wiping his hand over and over along his leg, and forced himself to stop.

Eddies of wind swirled bits of paper, lifting them high and then dropping them. Like everything else in this world, the alley had a rundown, neglected look. This other world, he thought. This world, not my own. As much as he wanted to be crazy, or in a coma dreaming, he no longer believed it. The sickening smell of fresh blood when the girl’s side was slashed open still lingered in the back of his nose. Her staring dead eyes had watched him as he walked past her body. He looked around. These barrels, stained with tar, bleached by the sun, were real. These red bricks in the wall, longer and

narrower than the bricks he was accustomed to, were real. He could touch them, feel their rough surface.

He rested his forehead against his arm on the wall and closed his eyes. A wild panic struggled to rise inside him, but he fought it down, knowing that if he gave in to it, he would run from the alley screaming and end up in a pool of his own blood with his side cut open.

If what the old woman said was true and he had fallen through a wall in his own world, then maybe he could fall the other way, out of this world and back into his own. He tried to remember the last thing he had been doing before waking up in this place. He had leaned back against the brick wall of an alley much like this one, about to smoke a cigarette. He patted his pockets, then remembered that he had left his cigarettes back at the house of the old woman. His matches were in the pocket of his suit pants, also back at the house.

He turned around and allowed his shoulders to press against the cool bricks. Glancing at the mouth of the alley to see if anyone watched him, he closed his eyes.

Now what do I do? he thought. Do I just will myself through the wall?

He tried imagining the wall becoming soft like the surface of water. In a moment he would slip under its surface. He just had to let go. It would happen any second now, as he released the memories of this world from his mind and thought about his own house, his office, his car, his wife and daughter. Any second now. Any second.

With a soft curse, he opened his eyes and turned to look at the bricks behind him. They were just bricks. Maybe they were long and thin, but they were as hard as any bricks in his world. He thumped the top of one of the barrels with the heel of his hand. It made a dull sound. It was filled with something. Something real. Everything here was real.

Setting his mouth in a grim line, he tried again, harder this time. Nothing. Maybe I'm doing it wrong, he thought. He tried again. This time instead of trying to push himself back through the bricks by the force of his will, he let his mind go soft and empty, as it had been in the other alley. He had been half-drunk and tired, and had just wanted to relax. After ten minutes or so, he opened his eyes. Nothing.

He left the alley and started to walk along the sidewalk of the street with his hands in his pockets and his head down. It was not smart to do anything that would attract attention. From the corners of his eyes he watched the people who passed. They ignored him. Apart from their old-fashioned clothes and funny

hairstyles, they looked normal. Thank God his own hair beneath his hat was the same length as that of the men.

I can live here, he thought. If I am careful and don't ask any questions, I can find work and get a room. Maybe if I practice, I'll catch on to the knack of falling backwards through walls.

He giggled. A woman glanced at him. He hunched his shoulders and hurried on.

Who am I kidding, he thought. I've got terminal cancer. At best I might live three months, and I won't be walking around at the end, either. Say two months of real living. Eight weeks. Fifty-six days. That's what I've got to look forward to, best-case scenario—I don't get my guts cut open, and I drop dead in three months.

A slow, hot rage built inside him. All this was so damned unfair! What had he ever done to deserve this? He should be sitting at his office desk right now, going over columns of numbers. Instead, he was screwed, not just by this crazy world, but by the cancer. It was so over the top, so overkill.

Fuck it, he thought. If I'm going to die anyway, I might as well get some answers.

6.

THE CHURCH WAS AT THE END OF A LITTLE triangular park with a conservative-looking stone structure he guessed to be a bank on one side and a tall office building on the other. The bank had stone columns in front of it, but they were smooth, not fluted like the Greek and Roman columns he was accustomed to seeing. Maybe all old banks everywhere had stone columns in front of them. Only this bank probably wasn't that old, he corrected himself, it just looked old to him.

As was true of everything else in this crazy place, the church resembled a church, but did not look exactly like any church he had ever seen before. He crossed the grassy triangle between cast-iron park benches and made his way up the stone steps, which ran the full width of the high-roofed building. It had an enormous round window of stained glass over three sets of oak doors at the top of the steps, and was impressive enough to be a cathedral.

The right side of the middle door that he tried must have been twenty feet in height, but it opened soundlessly with surprising ease. He closed it gently behind him.

It was cooler inside. Sunlight slanted through the round window and cast bits of bright color over the rows of pews and the altar. Marble columns ran down either side of the long nave. They were smooth like the pillars on the front of the bank, but highly polished to show the different colors in the stone. The church was the most colorful thing he had seen in this world, he thought, apart from the clothing and the blood of the murdered teenage girl.

It appeared to be empty. He walked slowly up the carpeted aisle, his soft footfalls echoing down from the stone arches in the painted ceiling. The altar was of polished black stone and huge—it rose four feet or so above the floor and had a triangular surface that could not have been less than nine feet long on each side. The top was covered with an embroidered black cloth edged with gold braid that showed the design of a white tree with three spreading branches bearing lush green leaves. From the tree hung numerous small, bean-shaped white seeds. The tree had three sinuous, curling roots resembling great serpents, the wedge-shaped heads of which came together and seemed to drink from a round pool of red blood at the base of the tree.

He turned to look back down the center aisle the way he had come, and for the first time noticed the design worked into the round stained-glass window above the doors. It had not stood forth clearly when viewed from outside the church. S-shaped lines radiated from its center to divide it into three parts, each of which held a monstrous head. One was like the head of a dragon, another resembled the head of a bird with an enormous beak and a spiky crown of feathers, and the last looked something like the head of a hyena. All three seemed to stare down directly at the altar. The effect was unnerving. O'Brian had the uneasy sense that they watched him.

He heard footsteps from one end of the church transept, where there was a side door, and turned to see a mature woman in a white robe edged in gold approach with a smile. She had a full figure, her large and somewhat heavy breasts balanced by broad hips, and a round face with startlingly pale gray eyes and a small colorless slot of a mouth. Her curling, dark-blond hair was cut short enough to reveal her ears and was streaked with gray. Around her neck hung a silver ring that was divided into three parts by radiating S-shaped lines, just like the church window.

The woman extended her plump hand. O'Brian took it hesitantly, wondering what the custom in this world might be, but the woman shook his hand up and down in the usual way and released his fingers.

"How may I help you, child?" she asked in a gentle voice.

"Are you a priest?"

She regarded him with curiosity for a moment before she replied.

"I am Mother Theodora, a priestess of the Givers of Life. As you see by my robes."

O'Brian glanced around the church.

"Are we alone?"

"For the moment," the priestess said. "Why do you ask? I hope you don't intend to rob the church?"

She laughed, and O'Brian realized she was joking. He forced a smile and shook his head.

"Not today. I'd just like to talk with you for a few minutes, if I may."

"Of course, child. What troubles you?"

O'Brian dropped his eyes. He didn't want her staring into them while he was lying to her.

"Mother, I'm feeling confused about my faith."

"Don't be ashamed, child," she said in a warm, gentle tone. "Everyone has moments of confusion. It will pass."

"It would help me if you would answer some questions for me."

She took his hand and guided him to the nearest pew.

"Here, let's sit down while we talk. Now what do you wish to know?"

"About the two worlds," he began.

"Three worlds," she corrected gently. "The divine world, the real world, and the world of illusion."

"The world of illusion is the Plantation, right?"

She studied his face with curiosity.

"That's right."

"Mother, I've been wondering if it is truly as unreal as everyone says. I've been wondering if maybe it could be as real as this world."

She smiled with amusement.

"Many children say that, but I seldom hear it from a grown man."

"But how do we know it's unreal, if nobody has ever been there?" he persisted. "And aren't the Wallers real when they fall out of the other world into our world?"

“The gods made the other world for our use, child. It has no other purpose but to grow the life seeds that we harvest for the gods. It is the Plantation, they are the masters, and we are the reapers.”

He turned on his seat and pointed at the round stained-glass window.

“Are those the gods?”

“Those are but the earthly trinity of the gods. No man or woman has seen the gods, who maintain their places in the divine world as we maintain our places in the real world.”

“So it is only the Wallers who cross from one world to another.”

“That is correct,” she said, nodding. “The gods do not pass through the walls. They have no need.”

“Do the gods themselves plant the cancers in the people of the other world?”

“Cancers?” she repeated. “What are cancers?”

“The seeds that grow on the livers of the Wallers.”

“Ah, the life seeds. The gods make the false world and the people who dwell there in such a way that the seeds grow inside them. Most of them grow wrong, or too slowly, or in the wrong part of the body, but when the seeds grow right, those who bear them become Wallers and come to us for the harvest.”

“What of all the other seeds?”

The woman shrugged her rounded shoulders.

“They return to the dust along with the hosts who bear them.”

“You mean they kill the hosts,” O’Brian corrected, his voice tight.

She looked at his face for several moments with a strange expression.

“Your speech is odd. Are you from some other province?”

He realized that he had forgotten to maintain his accent. Careless, he told himself, don’t get careless.

“I’m from a province far to the south,” he said quickly. “Tell me, Mother, has it ever happened that the Wallers who fall into this world fall back out of it?”

She drew away from him on the wooden seat of the pew.

“That is quite impossible,” she said more sharply. “Your questions are very curious. Every child of nine knows these things.”

“Humor me, please. Pretend I know nothing of these matters. Tell me this: Has a Waller ever fallen into this world and avoided detection?”

She wrinkled her small nose in distaste.

“Such things happen, but not for very long. Sooner or later, the hounds smell them out.”

He wanted to ask what the hounds were but realized it would be something he would be expected to know. It was dangerous enough, asking questions on points of theology. He wondered why she was humoring him. Maybe she thought he was mentally impaired.

“Wouldn’t the cancers—I mean the life seeds—kill the Wallers if they stayed hidden in our world?”

“The seeds of life cease to grow when Wallers fall out of the Plantation. They begin to wither and shrink. That is why they must be harvested while they are fresh.”

That was worth knowing, O’Brian thought. Maybe if he could avoid detection in this world, he wouldn’t die of cancer after all. These people didn’t even know what the word cancer meant. Maybe none of them had cancer, because it would not grow here.

There was a rattle from the back of the church. O’Brian turned in his seat. The middle set of doors opened to admit a tall young man dressed in white robes similar to those of Mother Theodora, and a shorter man who was older wearing a tall black hat, a leather vest over a checked flannel shirt and leather trousers. But it was the thing on the end of the leash in the older man’s hand that fixed O’Brian’s attention.

It came sniffing up the aisle, its wedge-shaped head questing from side to side as it sampled the scents of the wine-colored carpet. Its body was all black, the deepest black O’Brian had ever seen with no highlights, and its limbs and torso were incredibly thin. In profile it resembled an emaciated greyhound. Around the head of the beast was a black ruff, somewhat like a lion’s mane, except that the hairs were thick and moved independently of each other.

O’Brian realized that this creature must be one of the hounds the Mother had mentioned. It was following a scent trail. His trail.

“There he is,” the short man muttered in a low voice, pointing at O’Brian.

The hound lifted its head and opened its long snout to reveal an array of triangular white teeth. It howled with an unearthly sound, like the hopeless cry of a damned soul.

Mother Theodora stood and moved away from him.

“Waller,” she hissed in accusation.

From a pocket of her robe appeared a folding knife with a white pearl handle. She flicked its long blade open expertly with one hand.

O’Brian leapt to his feet and stared around. He realized he was boxed in. The hound and the two men blocked the main entrance, and the priestess barred the

side door. He thought about pushing past her, but the familiar way she held her knife cautioned him against it.

The man in the leather vest released the hound from its leash. It made a bound toward O'Brian. Without thinking, he scrambled up onto the top of the triangular altar.

"Sacrilege!" the priestess cried.

They all paused, even the black hound. He realized that none of them would break the taboo of touching the altar. They could not reach him with their knives. They spaced themselves on the three sides of the altar and glared at him with fanatical purpose, each with an open knife in hand. The hound sat by its master and howled damnation.

"I saw him first. The offering is mine," Mother Theodora said in a possessive tone.

"But I identified him first," the short man in the black hat said.

"We will share in the blessing," the priest told them both.

"Just let me go, that's all I'm asking," O'Brian said.

They ignored his words.

He felt a kind of pulling sensation in his right side that gradually became more insistent. It began to hurt. He grunted and pressed his hand over the place. Why was the air around him becoming brighter? It sparkled above his head like dust motes caught in a beam of sunlight.

"What's happening?" he asked.

The hound howled once, and he found himself alone in darkness.

7.

THE PLACE WAS VAST, TO JUDGE BY THE DISTANT echoes that returned faintly when he spoke.

"Where am I?"

He straightened up. The pain in his side was gone. He felt his body gingerly and was relieved to discover no gaping wound. Whatever was growing from his liver must still be there. He turned a full circle and found only uniform darkness on all sides. It felt as though he stood in some gigantic cavern beneath the earth, but that was due only to the sense of vaulted space above him and the total silence.

When he tilted back his head to look directly upward, his heart froze for an instant, then thudded painfully.

The thing was enormous. Its central mass was larger than the body of a blue whale, and from it radiated innumerable slender tentacles that floated on the darkness like the stingers of a jellyfish in water. Tiny flecks of light covered its entire complex, convoluted surface. This was the only reason he could see the thing, since its body was as black as the darkness that surrounded it like a womb.

“Where am I?” he repeated, louder this time.

The fine black tendrils of the monster darted down and surrounded him. He screamed and fought against them as they wrapped themselves around his arms and legs, holding him helpless and immobile. Realizing that it was futile to struggle, he finally relaxed.

An image formed in his mind. He saw a kind of complex diagram of three spheres, one above the other. They were joined by a central conduit that reminded O’Brien of an umbilical cord. This channel ran through the centers of all three spheres. In some wordless way he understood that he was presently in the highest of the spheres.

“This is the divine world,” he said.

He felt a wave of affirmation.

“Are you one of the three gods?”

Amusement rippled through his body. It was mingled with the bitterness of contempt.

“Why do you poison my world with cancer?” he demanded.

Fear had left him. His very helplessness in the grasp of the monster gave him a kind of fatalistic courage.

The thought-sensation that came in response was too complex for him to absorb. He caught a hint of mingled yearning and hunger, and with them a sense of ownership. The overall impression was that the god, if god it was, needed his world and would do whatever it wished with its inhabitants.

“Why don’t you kill me.” It was more a request than a question.

Amusement tickled through his body, mingled with a sense of delight and attainment. This thing on the ceiling had been waiting for him, or for one like him, for a very, very long time. He felt the tingle of demand. It was ordering him to obey.

“You’re a god, I’m just a man. What can I do that you can’t?”

In his mind he saw an image of himself falling backward through a wall. This was repeated over and over, but each time the wall was different, sometimes brick, sometimes plaster, sometimes wood. At last he shook his head.

“Stop! I get it. You can’t pass through the wall between worlds, but I can.”

The black tentacles caressed his skin. He shivered with revulsion. It was like being touched everywhere by slender writhing eels. An image came into his mind. It showed him swallowing a black pill, and then falling backwards through the wall. He recognized the streets of the city in which he lived and worked. In the next scene he saw himself lying in a hospital bed, his body eaten up by cancer. Then he saw a scene of a closed coffin being lowered into an open grave. Beside the grave, dressed in black and weeping into a handkerchief, stood his wife, Cindy. At her side stood their daughter, Anne, a bewildered expression on her young face.

A single sparkling tentacle descended slowly from the undulating mass of black flesh on the ceiling of the cavern. Its end wavered through the air before his face, and he realized that it held something wrapped in its slender tip—a black bean about the size and shape of a small unshelled peanut.

The image filled his mind of him taking the bean between his fingers and swallowing it. Then he saw himself released from the tentacles, and saw himself falling backward through the darkness to his own world.

“If I do this, what will happen?”

He waited. No image came into his mind.

“I won’t do it until I know what will happen. Why do you want this?”

Suddenly his body was wracked with excruciating agony. He would have collapsed into a fetal position had not the web of tentacles held him up. The agony stopped as quickly as it had begun. He shuddered and gasped for breath, his body bathed in a sweat of pain.

“Now we both know you can hurt me,” he said through gritted teeth. “Tell me why you want me to swallow this black seed.”

He felt a sense of reluctance, and then saw an image of a black shoot growing out of the center of his chest. He somehow knew he was dead and beneath the ground. The shoot pushed itself above the surface and quickly grew into a black tree with writhing tentacles in place of branches. O’Brian recognized it as the tree he had seen drawn on the wall of the alley, when he had fallen through from his own world. It seemed so long ago, but had only been yesterday.

“You can’t make me do this, can you? You can only hurt me.”

A sense of untold ages of agonies rolled through his flesh. The god was telling him that it could make him suffer for a million years, for eternity if needed.

“But you can’t force me,” he repeated, knowing somehow that he was correct. It might be able to make him swallow the seed, but it could not send him through the wall between worlds. Otherwise, it would not have needed him to carry the seed.

Another wave of agony racked his body, stronger than the first. It felt as though every nerve were being scraped by the edge of a knife blade. He endured it without screaming, but it left him weeping silent tears of relief when it finally ended.

“The black tree is a death sentence for my world, isn’t it?”

He received a complex sense of renewal and saw a moving image of a farmer tilling his field with a plough, the rich black soil turning over on the shining steel blade.

“You are replanting,” he said as he suddenly understood. “Your crop of life seed is almost played out so you’re going to grow another crop.”

Affirmation.

“I won’t—”

The pain was a hundred, no, a thousand times more intense than before. It became his world. He forgot who he was, where he was. He lost all sense of the passage of time. How long he hung in a mindless, screaming state he had no way to estimate, but at last he became aware that the pain had stopped.

The sense passed through his body that what he had felt thus far was only the smallest part of the torments he would endure unless he obeyed.

“Very well, I agree,” he shrieked, his throat raw from screaming.

No tricks, the thing on the ceiling conveyed to him with a sense of playful warning. The merest tickle of pain passed through him and made him shriek in terror.

“No tricks,” he said.

His body was released from the enfolding black tentacles, which withdrew upward like hairs, all but the one that held the black seed. He took it into his hand. It felt unnaturally cold and heavy. Without hesitating, he placed it in his mouth and swallowed. It took a while to work its way down his esophagus, since he had no water to ease its way. At last he felt it reach his stomach.

“That’s done,” he said tonelessly. “Now how do I fall back into my own world?”

The tentacle that had held the black seed touched and caressed him on the forehead almost with tenderness. He had a sense of knowing what to do. It was absurdly simple. He had been trying too hard before, in the alley. It was just a matter of relaxing the mind and letting it slip backwards.

At the last possible instant, he filled his thoughts with an image of the interior of the church and its triangular altar.

Just before he fell through the wall, he caught an explosion of fury from the black god on the ceiling, and he smiled.

8.

THE INSIDE OF THE CHURCH WAS DARK. NIGHT HAD fallen. Whether it was the same night he had vanished into the divine world, or some later night, he had no way of guessing. It had seemed like an eternity in the black place, but perhaps it had been no more than a few hours.

As he had hoped, the church was deserted. He had returned to the altar because it was the one place in the real world where he was certain he could pass through the wall. He would have visualized some other, less conspicuous part of the city to fall into, but he was not sure the trick worked that way and had not dared risk the chance of failure.

He climbed off the altar and made his way to the side door of the church, which he found unlocked. The priesthood was uncommonly trusting, he thought. Perhaps there was no one in this accursed place who would dare to rob them.

The door opened on a walled burial ground. From the star-shot sky clear moonlight bathed the headstones. The moon hung high above the trees, a little more than half full. Wandering across the grass between the stones, he found a grave newly dug and waiting for its occupant. Here, he dropped to his knees.

His stomach felt strangely full. It rolled and undulated with unease. Without hesitation, O'Brian leaned forward and forced himself to vomit. It was not difficult. The thought of that black seed within him revolted him on a primal level of his being. Something caught in his gaping throat and gagged him, then slid forth and landed in the bottom of the hole. He blinked and peered down. It was black and soft, about the size of a large slug, which it resembled. Its slowly undulating sides glistened in the moonlight. He wondered in horror how it had

managed to grow so greatly in size during the few short minutes it lay within his stomach.

Grimacing with determination, he crawled to the side of the grave where the soft earth was heaped and began to push it into the hole with his hands until the black thing was covered with grave soil. With a final gasp, he sat back on his heels. He thought of the frustration of the writhing god on the ceiling of the vault in the divine world, and smiled to himself. Whatever happened to him, the black tree would never grow in the world occupied by his wife and daughter.

After resting for the space of a quarter hour, he pushed himself up and left the burying ground by a gate in the wall. In spite of the late hour, the streets were not deserted. He heard voices in the distance shouting back and forth, and every so often the despairing howl of one of the black hounds. Mother Theodora had raised the alarm. Men were still searching for him. If one of those accursed hounds crossed his trail, it would run him down quickly. The black thing in his stomach had left him drained of energy, too weak to walk far.

He decided to try to make his way back to the canal and the house of the old woman. If her corpse had not been discovered during the day, he could sleep there in safety until morning. There was food and water, and a change of clothing. Besides which, I need a cigarette, he thought. His pack of cigarettes, still more than half full, was sitting in the inner vest pocket of his suit jacket. He could see it when he closed his eyes, could smell the tobacco and feel the texture of the filter end on the tip of his tongue.

One of the mobs caught him on a back street before he had gone half the distance to the old woman's house. They had a hound and it picked up his trail and led them unerringly to where he fled, a small and dirty little courtyard with only one way in or out. All the doors that opened on the courtyard were locked for the night. O'Brian found himself trapped. When they came pouring through the gateway with their wicked little knives drawn and open, he faced them and merely spread wide his arms.

"Here I am, you crazy murdering bastards," he said. "Do your worst."

The leader of the mob, a big man with a bald crown, who was the first hatless man O'Brian had seen apart from the priest, turned and held back the others until he was able to restore some sanity to their blood-crazed eyes. The black creature they called a hound continued to howl and bay at him by turns until the man who held its leash cuffed it to silence with his hand. Much to O'Brian's surprise, they put away their knives and took firm hold of his arms on either side.

“Aren’t you going to cut me open?”

“I only wish I had the pleasure,” the bald man said. “Mother Theodora has commanded that you be brought back to the church unharmed.”

“What do the priests want with me?”

No one bothered to respond. They dragged him along the brick streets, muttering with dissatisfaction among themselves. They were not accustomed to running down a Waller without taking his life seed, and it vexed all of them.

As they neared the church, the ground began to shake and a low rumble filled the night air.

“Earthquake,” one of the men said.

“No, look!” another cried out.

Beneath the bright light of the moon, a black stalk rose behind the church and curled around its bell tower. Its trunk was as thick as a subway car and grew thicker even as they watched. Branching shoots extended outward from the main stem, writhing like black serpents, and curved down to touch the street, where they burrowed into the paving stones, breaking them up with ease and penetrating deep into the ground beneath. Within seconds new shoots arose from the places these branching tentacles entered the earth.

The speed with which the black tree propagated itself was both astonishing and terrifying. It froze the mob into place. They could not move, even when two of the questing black tendrils of the tree caught up a man and the hound and lifted them high into the night air. The hound wailed piteously a single time. O’Brian heard its spine break as the tendril tightened its grip. The man was not so fortunate. His screams continued for the space of half a minute while his vitality was sucked from his body, leaving a shrivelled and blackened corpse.

O’Brian recovered his wits before the others. He twisted free from the grasp of those who held his arms and ran away from the church even as the questing tendrils sank themselves into the ground beneath the street all around him.

The leader of the mob noticed him flee and screamed an order to the rest to go after him. Three of them obeyed and ran at his heels after O’Brian. The others scattered in different directions, trying to avoid the questing black tendrils that sought to wrap around them. All this, while the ground never ceased to quake and rumble.

What have I planted in this world? O’Brian wondered as he ran.

He felt satisfaction, not regret. Contact with the moist black soil of the open grave must have activated it. The tree would continue to grow whatever happened to him. If ever a world deserved to be destroyed, it was this one.

Maybe the world that replaced it would be remade into something less pitiless and grim. In any event, his own world was safe, at least for now.

A thought almost stopped him in his tracks. He stumbled and kept running. What would happen to the other Wallers who fell through into this world? They would be caught up by the black tree and killed the instant they came here. He had to get back to his world to warn them. The entire human race had to be told what was going on when people suddenly disappeared without leaving a trace. Parents had to know what happened to children whose faces ended up on cartons of milk. Maybe the liver cancers could be treated if they were caught in time. Even if nobody believed his story, he had to tell them, to try to warn them.

But how can I get back home? he wondered. I was only able to fall from the divine world to this world with the guidance of the god. I tried before and couldn't do it alone.

He stumbled, dropped to his hands and knees, and spat out the bloody taste that welled in his throat. This was more running than he had done in twenty years. He wasn't in condition for it in spite of his workouts at the gym. Staggering up again, he looked behind and saw that his pursuers had dwindled to only the bald leader of the mob. His companions had all deserted him. The bald man jogged grimly toward him, puffing like a bellows with the effort. Behind him, a nightmare of black and writhing stems that looked like the tentacles of giant squids rose high above the roofs of the buildings and seemed to cover half the city skyline.

O'Brian faced his pursuer. The bald man stopped a dozen feet away and stood gasping for air. His face dripped with sweat and his clothes were soaked with it. I probably don't look any better to him, O'Brian thought.

"I'm not going back with you."

"You will do what the church tells you to do," the bald man barked.

O'Brian pointed over his shoulder.

"What church?"

The other man stared at him with a strange expression, then turned slowly. He stood frozen to the spot, looking at the nightmare scene while the earth continued to shake and heave beneath their feet. The shaking was strong enough to make bricks and cornice stones fall from nearby buildings. One of the cast-iron light poles tipped over and clanged to its side on the street.

O'Brian left the bald man and continued to walk in the other direction until he came to an alley. He entered its mouth and stopped midway along its length.

Concentrating to shut out the rumble of the ground and the distant screams, he closed his eyes and leaned his shoulders back against the brick wall.

If I can only remember what the god showed me, he thought. It was the opposite of force. It was a kind of mental ju-jitsu, a misdirection whereby the power was turned inward against itself.

Something slammed hard against the street at the mouth of the alley. He opened his eyes and saw that a huge black shoot had sprouted up through the bricks and was sending out numerous questing side tendrils in search of nourishment. Two of them felt their way blindly into the mouth of the alley. He closed his eyes again and thought of his wife and daughter, holding their images in his mind. A sense of peace rolled over him like a soothing wave.

His belly twisted in on itself and he fell backward.

The Megalith Plague

DON WEBB

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THERE HAD BEEN A LITTLE CONTROVERSY WHEN MY great-grandfather died shortly after the Civil War. He had asked that two large stones be set at his feet and his head in the “manner of the Druids.” Because of his medical service to the community of Flapjack, Texas, and (ironically) his preeminence in the local Masonic Lodge, this heathen custom had been observed. Last night they drug them off for another model Stonehenge.

According to the *Flapjack Recipe* there are now four hundred and fifty-seven models of Stonehenge in this county.

For me it began with the cockroaches.

Flapjack, Texas, is on the road between Austin and Dallas. Stagecoaches used to stop here for food and water for man and beast. Hence its high-carb name. With the coming of Mr. Ford’s affordable device, Flapjack and its sister communities of Comesee and Doublesign were doomed not to grow very large. If you live in central Texas you have driven through these towns hundreds of times, probably never even noticing them as separate entries in the blur outside your window. By the time I practiced medicine in Flapjack, there wasn’t even a place to buy—well, you know.

But there were cockroaches. Not your little-bitty German cockroaches, not your more urban African cockroaches. There were *huge* cockroaches. Locals call them “palmetto bugs.” *Periplaneta americana*. These suckers were three inches long. They could fly. Sometimes you had to step on them twice to kill them. They weren’t scared of light, so they didn’t even have the good taste to scurry away when you pulled the string dangling from your kitchen light at two in the morning, after delivering a baby at some godforsaken farm. Sometimes they would fly right on you and make you wish that you weren’t such a lousy doctor that you had to practice in a region where nobody thought about suing their doctors for incompetence. I didn’t practice here because great-granddad did. I practiced here because they would have me. I was staring thirty-five in the face, knew I had to leave Las Vegas before lawsuits caught up with me.

I bought the two-bedroom stucco house with the thousand coats of white paint and fifty thousand cockroaches. No one would know that I graduated last in my class. They would know me as a descendant of a healer. They were glad I didn’t have an accent.

At night they ran over me. Not the Flapjackers, the cockroaches. The palmetto bugs. They loved my ears and nose, no doubt thinking of them as sexual organs of an even bigger member of their species. My return to the ancestral homeland had not prepared me for the notion of an insect copulating with my nostril, so I went to the Home Depot in Doublesign and purchased four times the recommended amount of insect fogger. In the checkout line I met Richard Scott.

A short man, I would guess five foot two, his gray beetle brows and the lines of grime across his forehead were not inviting. His bloodshot slate blue eyes were a little too wet. He smelled of welding, but he was buying thirty or so precut 2x4s. He glared at me, clearly angry. Was he a friend of the roaches?

“So you are the new doc,” he said.

“I took over Dr. Hawthorne’s practice. My great-grandfather,” I began.

“Is dead,” he finished. “I need some meds. I have to renew.”

“What do you need?”

He rattled off a list of anti-psychotics, anti-convulsants, mood stabilizers, anti-depressants, typical and atypical neurolyptics—and frankly some stuff I had never heard of.

“I’ll need you to come by my office. Perhaps tomorrow morning,” I said.

“Good; then you can see I’m crazy, and you’ll leave me the fuck alone. I am, you know. Crazy. Bugfuck crazy. Ask anyone about Scott.”

I saw no reason to doubt his statement.

I intended to set off my foggers the next morning and drive the mile or so to my office. I would look over Dr. Hawthorne’s records and check on Mr. Scott’s bugfuck status. However, the invitation to ask anyone was a strong one. I had not made friends with anyone in Flapjack, and perhaps giving them a chance to tell me about their village idiot would endear me to their bosom. I dined that night at the Cobra, which offered a free meal after you had dined there eleven times. Such bounty, I thought, was to be patronized. So while enjoying my chicken fried steak I asked the waitress if she knew a Mr. Scott.

“Why, he’s just crazy, hon. But I, well, don’t you... I’m sure he’ll give you a lot of business.”

It seemed that Mr. Scott had committed three sorts of offenses. The first is that he was the unmarried son of a very wealthy family, which was a

severe offense. The waitress looked at me strangely while giving me that news. I wondered if she thought I was gay. His second crime was sculpting. He produced an ugly sort of high modernist sculptures out of I-beams and T-beams, the sort of sculptures that banks display to prove that they are cultured. These two social crimes, however, did not condemn Mr. Richard Scott. They merely made him odd. He also beat people with wrenches and burnt them with acetylene torches. His violence broke out every few years. His trust fund covered it pretty well, and heck, most people knew enough to get away from him, and when things got bad old Doc Hawthorne would add a new anti-convulsant or a new anti-psychotic. Scott would calm down for a spell.

I heard all this over sweet coconut meringue pie and bitter black coffee.

The stars at night were big and bright, as I drove home and the moon a full cantaloupe. The moon even put to rest my cynicism, which shows how powerful the central Texas moon can be.

The next day I pushed down the little green plastic notch on the bug foggers and muttered my vengeance as I set them out. I was putting down the last fogger in my living room when I tripped. I went down, the fogger went up and in a freak moment passed before my open eyes, giving them one hell of a blast of bug spray. I *thunked* my head good on the floor and passed out with the fogger blowing into my bloodied nose. As their hissing filled my ears everything seemed to light up orange and the floor seemed to turn to slime; if you ever huffed ether in college or glue in middle school you'd know the feeling. I wondered if the cockroaches felt this way as they died. Maybe some cockroach made it once, survived, and went back to the roach club to talk about heaven.

When I came to, I was restrained. I couldn't open my eyes because of the bandages, and I could not lift my hands because they were tied to the bed, so that I wouldn't tear off my bandages, but I did not understand my situation. So I jerked strongly against the bed and gave a muffled cry, which my insecticide-soaked nose, mouth, and throat meant as a scream of terror.

Scott answered me. "Don't I know it, Doc. You know I've been in that very bed. It'll pass, just tell yourself it will pass."

"Where am I?"

"You are in the Doublesign Minor Emergency Clinic, although I am sure you feel that you had yourself a major emergency. Currently you are tied to

the bed, which in my vast experience means they feel you will do harm to yourself or others. Will you do harm to yourself or others, Doc?"

"What's going on?"

"Doc, you tried to get high on bug juice. I saved you before you flung your consciousness out into the void. I decided that would be a waste, and I might not get my scripts refilled."

"Scott, I wasn't trying to get high. Now get me a doctor."

"I don't take orders, now if you would like to make a request."

Before I said anything I listened. I was hoping to hear some sound that told me I was in the tiny six-bed hospital in Doublesign. I wanted to hear an IV machine beep or a soda drop out of the soda machine, or Dr. Fresno making his rounds. I didn't hear anything, and I realized that I could be anywhere. I couldn't smell anything; my nose was just a mass of burning pain. In fact, I could almost hear its throbs. The pain must have been what woke me. Why didn't they have me on a morphine drip?

Then the blackness behind my eyes got darker, and I was gone for a while.

When I came to again I called out for a nurse, and one answered. Her guitar-twangy voice soothed my soul; I was indeed in a hospital. Dr. Fresno came in soon after. I found out that I would be here for another two to three weeks. He would take my patients in the meantime. They told me that Scott had rescued me. Impatiently waiting to be my patient, he had walked over to my home after an hour. He kicked open my front door, and he called the ambulance from Doublesign. He claimed to be a distant cousin.

This proved true. My great-granddad's second daughter had married into the Scott line. Scott pointed this out to me the next time he visited me.

"Didja ever wonder, Doc, why you've got no friends here? It's 'cause you and I are kin. I probably shouldn't have you as my doctor."

"What do you mean?"

"We have the same great-grandfather. My only blood relative would stand to gain a lot of money if I died. It doesn't exactly motivate you, hippocratically speaking. Maybe you and I should write out wills to each other. Be more fair-like. I had been intending to leave my wad to the Sloane Art Museum in Doublesign as they have a couple of my sculptures."

"Scott, I'm not interested in your money."

“Now that’s a lie, Doc. I may be crazy, but I ain’t stupid. In fact, Doc, you would be surprised at the depth of my art education.”

He spoke truly. I wanted the damn money and spent many blindfolded hours thinking about what drugs that would kill him off. When I returned to light, I would no doubt think differently, but you think odd thoughts in the dark.

The next day, or later that night, Scott woke me.

“This is choice, Doc, really choice. You know Fenster?”

“Yes,” I said, having no idea who Fenster was.

“Well, he found something on his land. He was putting a well where an old church was and he found a little metal box. Inside was a small book called *How to Worship God Correctly*. Seems like we’ve all been doing it wrong for years. He drove to the Kinko’s and ran off a few copies and gave them out at the Dairy Queen. Now there’s going to be a town meeting.”

“Did you get a copy?”

“Of course I did. I get me a double-dipped chocolate cone every day about three. I think that soft serve custard is the one of the two best parts of civilization.”

“What’s the other one?”

“Oxy-acetylene welding.”

By this time the bandages were really starting to itch. My hands had been freed days before. It was hard to keep track of the pace of days. Scott came often. As the hospital’s major donor, he could come anytime. For all I knew, this conversation took place at six in the evening or four in the morning or noon.

“So how are we supposed to worship God?”

“With megalithic stone circles. Mankind apparently hit the mark with Stonehenge, Nabta Playa, Bagnold’s circle, or Sentinel Hill in Massachusetts. That’s what God wants.”

“I bet that went over big with the Baptists.”

“You’d think not, but everyone seemed pretty positive about it.”

I didn’t know what to make to this remark. I had never heard of Nabta Playa or Bagnold’s Circle. I wondered if he had taken his meds today. I had asked Dr. Fresno to keep him out of my room, but Fresno said he slipped past the guard. I doubted that anyone would say no to him. I didn’t like being quiet for too long so I said, “So what do you make of it?”

“I don’t know, Doc. I have never been the religious type. Seems to me God has already made enough calendars with the moon and the sun.”

The twilight came when Dr. Fresno cut away my bandages. The room was dim, and I kept expecting some *Twilight Zone* moment when they would look at me and see me as a monster. Instead, for a moment I was the one horrified. Something seemed wrong with the angles of the room, as though everything lunged toward me. I put my hands out, and then I felt stupid. Dr. Fresno smiled his half-senile smile. I could see Scott waiting for me in the hall.

Dr. Fresno said, “Richard agreed to drive you home, you can drive tomorrow, but let’s remember our sunglasses, Dr. Huff. Your eyes are fine, and you’ll soon be over any respiratory distress.”

The moon was dark. It had only been two weeks since I had scalded my eyes, fried my brain, and cooked the insides of my lungs. It felt as if months or years had gone by. Scott drove me home, and as his old white Chevy pickup turned at the town square I saw my first Stonehenge. The stones stood six or seven feet tall. I asked him to stop. He shrugged and did so. I realized that people were walking around in the middle of the circle. I yelled out to them, but they didn’t yell back.

“They ain’t always friendly, Doc. Just simple country folk.” He laughed all the way to my house. I didn’t get the joke. I was glad to see my SUV in the driveway; maybe I should just drive away tomorrow.

The next day I saw four circles in progress. Two stone. One made of old TVs, which I frankly thought was pretty cool, and one made of cement parking slabs, which I thought was a little tacky. None of my patients had anything to say about the circles and looked at me with raw hatred when I asked. So I let the matter drop. When I drove home I saw six circles.

The next day eight.

Richard Scott dropped by my office. I was glad to see him. Any fantasy I had of doing him in had vanished. I was trying to make my mind to stay or leave or just call CNN. He just wanted me to reauthorize his twelve prescriptions.

I asked him, “What happened while I was blind up in Doublesign?”

“The *Flapjack Recipe* ran the complete text of *How to Worship God Correctly*. In my opinion it caught on.”

“For the love of God, are they all crazy?”

“You’re asking me? I left grad school because I thought my clay was talking to me. Weeks before this they were all worshipping a dead carpenter. I think the movement toward sculpture is healthy.”

“Did you read the *Recipe*?”

“Sure. I read it every day. That and the *Wall Street Journal*.”

“And it didn’t fill you with the need to go build Stonehenge a thousand times?”

“I take drugs so that I don’t get messages. See this one and this one and this one.” He pointed at his list of drugs. “They also keep me from thinking that Mr. TV is telling me something important. I could get you the issues of the *Recipe* they all went crazy reading, if you would like to see it.”

Part of me wanted to read that article more than anything; it’s the same part that makes me wonder what goes through a suicide’s mind as he hurtles toward the pavement. But the part of me that manages to brake a car at a red light stopped me. My breathing was rough. I don’t care what Dr. Fresno said, I think I had lung trauma.

Scott laughed. “You had to struggle with that one, didja? I can feel you, Doc, I can feel you.”

“But these people have jobs.”

“Like what, Doc? Selling crafts to rich Austinites on Market Mondays, farming, drawing SSD? Their jobs can wait a spell if they want to worship the stone circle god.”

“People will see as they drive by.”

“Doc, you can’t see a circle one from the highway, and if you could I don’t think there is a nary a word in Texas law against stone circles.”

“Why are they doing this?”

“Dotting ‘i’s’ and crossing ‘t’s.’”

I saw my last patient about three-thirty. I looked up Mr. Fenster in the phone book and I drove out to his farm.

There was a big circle in the back. Big Edwards limestone slabs, almost twelve feet high. They didn’t stand too straight. A tall thin bald man wandered among them, fretting. He wore a short-sleeve blue shirt and blue jeans. He looked worried.

Before I could speak he asked me, “Are you good with math? I don’t know if I set this up right.”

“I’m good at solid geometry,” I said. I had no idea why I said this, but like all humans I want to fit in; it is a hard-wired circuit in our amygdale, it makes baboons groom each other.

“What about astronomy?”

“Nope, no good there.”

He looked at the daytime sky as though he could spot something. I tried to figure out how he had set the stones up. This wasn’t down with a simple tractor, and the damage to the ground seemed pretty small. I faintly remembered the guy’s wife. She had been in to see me for rheumatoid arthritis a month ago. I started to tell him that recent findings had shown that Stonehenge wasn’t a calendar, but a gravesite for elite pre-Celts. I decided the phrase “elite pre-Celts” didn’t get said much in rural Texas.

“How’s Mrs. Fenster?” I asked.

“Mildred? She’s gone. Doesn’t hold with this.” He made a vague hand gesture that I took to mean the standing stones.

“You were the one that found the book, weren’t you?”

“Yes. That was my honor. You’d think I’d do a better job.”

“Why does God want so many calendars?”

He snapped out of his daze and gave me the same hateful look I’d seen in my patients’ eyes. “I don’t rightly think it’s our job to question God. Besides, it’s not about calendars. They’re windows like me, you know, Fenster. It’s about salt and ground glass. I’m no good at explaining it, I’m just a cog in the machine.” He pursed his lips and blew out a long sigh. There seemed to be a struggle inside him; I’ve seen it in patients that want to tell me something but are embarrassed or afraid. He had no more to say to me.

That I didn’t leave Flapjack that night is a sign that the wrong part of me was winning. I might not risk the damnation of reading the *Recipe*, but for the moment I couldn’t leave the scene.

Next morning Scott banged on my door at first light.

“Come out, Doc, you gotta see this.”

My SUV, *sans* tires, was up on cinderblocks.

Scott said, “Somebody wants you to stay. Ever see *The Wicker Man*, you know where that cop gets sacrificed Druid-style?” He laughed his hick butt off and then offered to drive me to my office tomorrow.

“I need out of here. Drive me to Dallas,” I said. I shivered because I heard my own fear.

“No can do, Doc, these are my people. I’ve got to live here.”

“Don’t you see they’re all crazy?”

In his best Norman Bates voice he said, “We all go a little mad sometimes.” He continued, “Look, they’re not any crazier than before. Look at your neighbor Jim Cusson across the street there. He used to spend ten hours a day making birdhouses for tourists to buy once a month on Market Mondays. So now he’s put a circle of them for his own self up in his yard. Now I expect his purple martins aren’t into archaeo-astronomy, but hell I don’t know that tourists were that into his carving.”

On the way to work I saw twelve circles. My office was full of patients. Bunged-up thumbs, sprained backs, carpal tunnel. Heavy construction taking its toll. I had never had as many patients. I worked through lunch and even into the night. It was my best day as a doctor ever. There was no guesswork, no subtle readings of signs. Maybe I had left my home city for great-grandfather’s village for a reason. Maybe they needed me. Scott drove me home.

Sleep cleared my mind some. When Scott drove me to work, I asked him to drive me out of here. He just said, “I’m sure that Mildred Fenster asked for the same thing. So just pipe down.”

At my office the phone was dead and the injured were many. I kept my mouth shut; even when they told me they had pulled down great-granddad’s stones. I would leave tonight and tell the authorities. I tried not to watch the clock all day. I tried not to glare at the endless stream of patients that crossed my door. I tried to act calm. I wanted to tell Scott as he drove me home, but all I could think of was the number of medicines he took. His personality was a leaky sieve, a dribble-glass of self.

My SUV was no longer on blocks. It had been incorporated into a carhenge down the street. I saw the Cusson kid’s red CRF230 Honda leaned against his pink stucco house. That little street bike looked prettier to me than Pamela Anderson. I could hotwire it and make it to Dallas. I made my move at midnight. I ran across the pavement and up on the lawn feeling as though the nearly full moon was a spotlight aimed directly at me. Then I marveled at something as miraculous as Mona Lisa’s smile—keys. People don’t always take their keys in villages the size of Flapjack. I pushed the

rice rocket away from the concrete porch, hit the juice, and off I went. Two roads later I would be on the highway.

The moon seemed to get brighter and brighter as I sped away. Liberty does things to moonlight, just as moonlight does things to liberty. I saw stones everywhere, and stumps, and trashcans, and PVC pipe, and bones. Something seemed to flash in the sky above me, and I looked up. A small stone hit me. I had crashed through a tiny Stonehenge in the middle of the highway; it was made out of pebbles and orange lane markers.

The tiny circle launched me into space. I seemed to be heading toward an orangy sky and then my belly scraped the ground, and I heard people yelling.

They dragged me to the center of town, to the middle of the largest circle, where Scott was their king. He wore a crown made of stainless steel knives and forks that he had welded together in a strange fashion.

They reflected the orange light from the sky where the moon had begun to melt, and the stars had become prismatic ovals.

The villagers sat me in a camp chair. I was expecting Scott to leer and act like a movie villain. Instead, he was sad. I was the dull pupil that couldn't quite do the lesson.

"Do you know what your problem is, Dr. Huff? You don't ask the right questions."

His country bumpkin accent was gone.

"What questions should I have asked?" I asked.

"Well, cousin of mine, you should have asked how a mentally ill guy in central Texas sells his art to famous places. You think I'm a Ray Johnson?"

This seemed to be a rather random thread to pursue while the moon melted, but I asked anyway.

"I did great work on my MFA. Hell, I didn't even go crazy until my doctorate. I had a Question. All great Quests start with a Question. You know what my question was?"

"Stone circles?" I asked.

"Oh, thank God for that. I was beginning to think there were no smart genes in your part of the family. Yes. Between four thousand and two thousand B.C. mankind couldn't make enough of these things. Fred Flintstone should be calling Barney Rubble and saying, 'Hey, Barn, want to

come over and make a whopping big stone calendar this weekend?’ ‘Gee, Fred, sounds great, I’ll bring Bam-Bam.’ I asked why—why the obsession with time.”

“Can we talk about the sky instead?”

“You’ll have a long time to talk about the sky. At least I think so. As the comic villain in this post-Shakespearian tragedy, I am allowed one monologue.”

The air had begun to shake as though a thousand fans had been turned on. Some of them were inside my lungs. A few of the Flapjackers began to cough and sneeze. My mad cousin continued.

“So why the obsession with time?”

I answered, “Crops. It was the big breakthrough.”

“I thought so at first, but then my art history professor directed me to certain older books. Pre-human books actually. Mankind wasn’t the first species interested in the big calendars. There were *things* that had begun big stone works on Earth millions of years before. Time is a dimension that life oozes through like a slug on a dew-wet leaf.”

The chair had begun to squirm under me. I started to stand, but something had wrapped itself around my wrist; for a crazy moment I thought I was back in the hospital bed. That my wrists were still bound but that my bandages were coming off and I was really going to see the world. Everything lunged at me, then relaxed back into its normal spatial relationships.

“You see, the calendars form a bigger shape. A series of angles that directs things. Imagine the things you call dimensions—length, width, time, and so forth—were not as interesting as life, senses, consciousness. Imagine all that bio-stuff as a sort of big slug. You make one path of ground glass and salt and one path of wet slime and slug food; where does sluggy go?”

I could feel things sprouting at the base of my spine. My teeth had begun to move independently. I felt emotions that were analogues of lust and fear and the part of you that waits to plummet go down on the roller coaster. It felt like the rush of smoking *salvia divinorum* or whipping roach killer. *I am still in my house dying, none of this is happening.* But for once in my life, denial didn’t work.

“I got the big picture, cousin. I saw all the angles. I saw every angle from Yr to Nhhngr. I could control the path of all that bio-stuff. I could use God’s

technology. I'm not rightly sure what god—here is where it gets tricky. I don't know if I am delivering cows to the slaughterhouse door or helping beautiful butterflies out of their cocoon. That was when I lost it. I just had to find out, so I made the little box for Fenster to find. I mixed an old Baptist hymnal with the *Typhonian Tablets* with simple diagrams showing all the angles. Humans picked up where they had stopped four thousand years ago. Now little sluggy is almost there."

"So you are giving me the Scooby Doo speech and now the monster comes along and eats me? That's my life?" I asked.

"You are very stupid. This is not about you being a little sacrificial lamb, cousin. It is about a new world. For one instant as an artist I saw I could sculpt the whole world, so I did. I used family money and a little Texas town, and then fate threw me you as the first person to visit my gallery. Well, not fate, really. When our great-granddad James Scott began playing with weird notions about Druids, someone in England sent him the *Typhonian Tablets*. Some poor soul had translated them for certain English Rosicrucians, then hanged himself. Dr. James couldn't read them very well, but he didn't have my advantage of being crazy. You will be changed to be able to view my art. It is what I sold my soul for, so to speak. I am making you into the perfect audience."

With his left hand he pointed to the sky, which shone pure, orange, and smelled of burning wax; with his right hand he pointed down at the earth, which was weeping greenish mercury. "So tell me, cousin, what hath God wrought? Slaughterhouse or paradise? Did our ancestors' ancestors stop making the stone circles because they were unworthy, or because they were afraid? What do you see and smell and hear that a little crazy human like me can't? Do you worship my sculpture of space and time, mind and soul? Or should I worship you?" He fell to his knees before me, and as he bowed his head, the weird crown of flatware fell from his head.

I could feel what all the angles were doing to me, my perception shattered and then reformed in more dimensions than before. Goodbye 3D.

And the air smelled sweet like souls separating into their separate parts, and I could hear the gentle pops of the eyes of the mealy little humans around me, and the hairs on my arms began to move independently and I began to see into time, just shallow pools at first, and there was great-granddad getting his package from England, and his chestnut mare rearing

in fear of the book and there was the One who would Come in Its polychromatic polychronic poly-gendered terror-beauty.

I stood free from the chair, my feet sinking a few inches into the mercury-like liquid. I breathed in the new heaven through my hollow teeth and I sucked in the newly charred earth through my roots and I called out to my Beloved who lures me into a thousand painful deaths of ecstasy, now at the end of Time.

Down Black Staircases

JOSEPH S. PULVER, SR.

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S HADOWS. SAMENESS WITH NO SOON
and silence
Sky without time...

Hand, trembling, hoping to be free of this gravity of impossible, wishing for magic carpet or a fifth of blurred and near numb.

Outside the window, Kingsport.

They say this is America. New England. They swear it's true. Hell, they'll show you the map. Don't you believe it. People lie. Governments lie. The world that bent your mind with its sharp moments last week, that's a lie.

It's all a lie.

Bit into my first one, swallowed it whole. Should have spit it out. Should have run.

I'm not supposed to be here. I had a flag. Had things. Places. I had a future, my friends and parents thought it was gold-plated and never worried or raised any concerns. And I didn't mess up. Walked straight. Followed the rules. All of them. I didn't even own a pair of jeans. See? I was good. Another genial VP—part paid planner, part paid worrier, sprinkle in a little bastard if and when needed—overseeing the right accounts, a few of which required more bastard, rising at the right pace. Work late, smile when you shake hands. Nice suits. Good restaurants. Drinks with significant people. Normal.

I was on my way to Boston. On my way to see her. Clea. Little white dress and that ass. You only saw women like that on TV, or in Hollywood, in the movies. Never had a woman like that say those things to me. Never had a woman dressed like that, built like that, offer me *everything*. Said she was all mine, said it while her breasts were pressed against my arm. Never knew they could be that soft. Never been that close. Never. Never imagined things like really happening. Not in my world.

Going?

I sure was. Hell and a hundred sulfur-drenched demons couldn't stop me, and jacked-up on pure lust I didn't stop to consider anything but the "100%-pure, *honeysweet* pussy" the avalanche of my go-ahead loaded on the back of my eyelids.

Friday. Ready to permit delirium into my world, burning with insistent. Checked my reservation with the hotel in Boston. Tried to leave the office early. Something bad put a stop to it. Three hours to remove the glitch from the deal.

Opened the door on night.

All the bragging they do about a Beamer's relish, that's true. I pushed my impatience into en route.

A weekend in Boston. Nights in her bed, or in my hotel room, or on the floor, who knew what and where and how many times, or in how many different ways? Ways like in those movies. Grape or whatever she wanted to drink. Painted toes. Dancing, vibrating. A real woman with her fingers playing with my tie. Shaved—she said so. Came right out and told me. Green eyes blessing my fever. The Devil tattoo—couldn't believe something that small could be so loud. Drowning in velvet wild things. Drove like a madman, careful wasn't on my speedometer and it wasn't on the map in my glove box.

Coast highway. No shape to the world here. Barely a light. A good hour lot of things would light up.

90+

Clea's ass and piece of a poem stuck in my head—

*I had been hungry all the years;
My noon had come, to dine;
I, trembling, drew the table near,
And touched the curious wine.*

Flat. Rubber clacking. Downhill—collision the direction I feared, down a patch of naked dirt that worked as a half-assed exit ramp—bumps or furrows... Lucky I didn't flip over... Finally coasting, pulled over. Cursed. Abandoned end of some industrial town... Dark...

Something like a street...

Didn't need my M.B.A. to know this was a place I shouldn't be. But I was.

Skipped my cell. Thought, do it yourself and "Get out of here." Fast.

Popped the trunk, started to change the tire.

That's when the first shadow appeared. Second barely seconds after.

Looked at my Rhode Island plates. “Welcome to Kingsport.” Oddly, clownishly, cocked his head, jester whose colors were on the wrong canvas. “Got a problem there?”

Stood. Did it slow. Facing deranged—high on drugs maybe, or so I thought, and mean, was sure about that aspect. Didn’t know what to say. “Flat tire.”

It grinned. “Can see that.” Bobbed its head. “Surely can.” Talking passed your fragility, dislodging pieces you make horizons from.

I wanted to step back, but there was no backward as I was against the fender. Saw things like this on *Law & Order*, but Providence isn’t New York City, one giant slum, vertigo of gang-bullet ruin unleashed, ripening the ground with terrible. Those things didn’t happen in Providence, *not to people like me*. All just some circumstance of whimpering and blood-crazed ugliness on TV. Never really bothered me. Never expected to sick my fault right in its face.

Blood pressure infected with impossible’s hammer. Lost in the panic of dumb. “Right. *Sorry*.” Loaded with my cringe.

Second, “Can see that too.” Grinned, adjusted his crotch. Wild eyes. Disheveled. Dripping cold. Moved, between no farewell and ruin, to my side and almost behind. Created dialogues in my perspective. Left no ripples.

First lit a cigarette. “Not a good spot.” Words, no relief for anxiety, bleeding with melodrama. “Habitation of gangrene and hell, a bitch that’ll skin ya down to the pulse.” Grin got wider, crazier. Looked back over his shoulder like he heard something in the darkness. Made some guttural sound. “Fucking world. Burn it down. *Burn it down...* Lonely place.” Expression asked if I understood. “Things here... are dying.”

Wanted to say something about current global economic conditions and the plight of both producers and consumers. Feared it would be a misstep connected to a hospital.

Rape victims are supposed to yell fire.

What about this?

Tightrope, trying to keep my color. Full of instant-stupid. Kept my mouth shut.

Nothing seemed to move.

“But that’s not really your concern.”

Might have nodded yes, you're right.

The shadow to my right snickered. Coughed. Flickered in the corner of my eye. KNIFE

Didn't know they were that big. STAB

That sharp.

Flood—mosaic—knot stifling logic, of nameless Jack the Rippers abruptly hammering futures. If it was a movie, no wide shot.

CUT MUTILATE KILL KILL

Blinking/wedged in a blanket/scream muffled by the sleeve that jumped into your mouth. Eleven years old watching *Psycho* through my fingers.

KILL KILL

Did this wolf have a gun too?

BULLETS

Unseen intruders, aliens injecting red dawn into hapless victims, leaving all is through.

Should I plead with him?

Would. Could instantly phrase a litany of petitions.

If that would work.

"But I'm in the mood tonight to be kind, so you hand me your wallet and change that tire and get the fuck out of Dodge... We both get what we want."

I did.

Slow. Like the cops on TV tell you. Afraid he'd think I had a weapon on me.

Or just change his mind.

700 dollars in bills, I wanted to make an impression with Clea that wasn't just plastic. He took it. Nodded the transaction was complete and he was impressed and happy. Left the credit cards—I was shocked; thought thugs always took it all. Tossed my billfold back to me.

I barely caught it.

"Thanks." Almost sounded like he meant it. Turned and walked away.

Didn't scream.

Didn't say thanks.

Sidekick slapped him on the back. Said, "Fucking tourists. Let's get a bottle."

They laughed. Left me the punch line of a joke I didn't get...

After my loss of luck, after any hope of sweet or yesterday-soft or tomorrow with a chorus of open arms was stricken from all calendars, after the war—when there was no sky, no feet dressed and able to run from the man in black, the man with the knife that had killed men—his blade that danced its lightning-bolt orgasm in their nervous hearts, that's when my hands began to shake.

Watched them vanish in blackness.

Blackness.

Impression, belly to breath, more than unpleasant. Alive? Felt like it. Felt like it. Stung the eyes to look at it.

But I did. Stared at it. Pushed and pressed focus into the visitation. What did it want? Was it capable of moving? Even to my lips if they screamed?

Capable. Here? Nothing was. Nothing had the tools, not a key not a verb not a light to illuminate the freeway that could take you to save, to make it come carry you home or far away.

Trying to recover. Vanish. Take a road that yielded to the measure of feet, somewhere where words clear devils from the path... Anywhere beyond the spurs THE END put to future.

Some ghost-story thing that engulfs some terror-prone plot of fearful victim being scraped by unseen, black rattled. No sound no motion but it was a vampire, a village of

Garbage

A fenced off lot Empty BLACK

Row of uninhabited bungalows

Too quiet

NULL and VOID as new terms you don't bargain your way out of.

Just stood there trembling. Pushing my eyes—

Weak neon. ReD. A bit of GREen. Down the street, three or four blocks—a black gulf of shadows and blacker stains poured between us—the light of a gas station. Hung my hopes on a phone.

Headed for what I hoped was a harbor. A face with a voice in it, stuck at the register arranging cigarette packages or reading a weekly magazine of stars uncovered, secrets exposed, until the clock placed its hands on midnight.

Scared you forget things, like the phone in your pocket. Maybe I just needed to see a face. One that had heard of the meek shall inherit and do

unto others.

In old noir films the streets are wet to give heightened effects to the lights. Not here. Bone dry. And lights? I half wondered if they were outlawed here. Then I wondered when here was.

Panicked-blind didn't see any sign when I left the highway and there wasn't a single word on anything here. No KEEP OUT. No street signs. Most of the bungalows on the other side of the street should have had CONDEMNED notices posted on the doors. They didn't. More than a few didn't have much glass left in the windows either. Of those that did, most were broken and the pieces of glass looked like jagged teeth.

This was a bad place. Worse it was nameless. Dead place full of fierce.

Walked faster.

Froze.

Shit.

I'd reached for the pen in my pocket, thought if need be it was the closest thing I had to a weapon, and brushed my phone.

Idiot.

Held it. Didn't get to think saved.

No Service.

Needed the lights at the gas station now. And a face to go with them.

In the blackness a great clock, too distant and weak to be brethren to the light I was aimed at, chimed. Didn't know what hour it welcomed but its tone certainly didn't speak of anything comforting.

Stopped dragging my feet and moved...

A dead traffic light... Dilapidated everywhere. Old doorways, whatever they had once cast with welcome, gone. Cracks had drawn and quartered dear, poverty repeated and repeated had threaded and curled any pleasing right out of them. Windows out of shines covered over internal faces and hell-seasons I knew would only carry manes of madness if I could see them. Porches, splitting boards losing their hard in endless obituary-hours, never near the word mercy...

100 years ago this neighborhood must have been poor now it was exploded, its wood and brick skins abbreviated, ready to fall and accept the soil that longed to bury it... Each window, each door, each stain of ink-dark hollow, screamed gone, screamed black, screamed will not, screamed you cannot do... Feral displaced language, grew in the ashes... No good on this

street with the moon in the gutter. Misery stretched its river down this street, didn't play fair, left ugly.

Bad place. Coming apart. Wasteland too empty for urban. Not one cigarette butt, no beer cans. No weeds in the cracked pavement. Even Providence has litter here and there.

Lifeless.

Except for the stacked bags of garbage.

No flies.

No cat or rat drawn to the foul-bouquet of some soft inside... *None?* In a place like this?

Outside of one's familiar habitat there are times when WRONG can easily be determined, when the hiss of this is not for you or of you transforms the acid in your stomach into the warning blast of a siren. I got it. Heard it loud and clear.

RAN

Tried not to smell the decay being painted by slimy water and unseen festivals saturated in nightmares.

Began to understand I had more to fear than the blades and drug-fueled whims of predators.

Half a block from the light, tried not to stare into the silent blackness. My brother Paul had studied the arts at BU and once said if you look at it things in there you can't see see you...

RAN

To the light—

Not a single moth in its current.

Tripped over my haste. Flight, down HARD. Slammed my head on the pavement. Response to thud-to-a-halt banged-up knee throbbing after the live-wire jolt. Blood, knee, forehead. Jammed two fingers trying to break my descent. Hadn't been bitten by the ground since I was eight, it all came back to me. Lucky didn't break anything but soft skin.

Rubbed.

Throbbing attached to expanding—too much—too much.

Slurred and grumbled at the pain.

Rise. Tortured and deliberately. Test.

Wince.

Eject a New York street watchword.

Someplace I didn't want to be. Slow. Unstable.

Hobbled... grunted—cursed.

Got there. One rusty pump. Unlit. Heavy-crisscross wire over the window. More heavy-wire and a banded metal frame over the door's window.

DOOR

Locked.

CLOSED

Old yellowed sign, an open mouth with no words of light.

I slapped at it.

"Someone think I picked this place? Fuck.

"Thought every bowery in America had a 24-hour place. Shit... Shit. Where am I?"

"You've come into my night." No-greeting alto, whiskeyraw, milled in a cascade of hours rooted in harrowing briars.

Froze.

Woman's voice. But—

In a place like this a voice like that could be ferocious, dangerous too.

I turned into the rasp. Eyes, things stained by turpentine or acid. "I am Alice. *Magg*." Lips that that never kissed anything Betty Crocker made or a man, tongue within nearly the same gray as the rag that passed for a dress. Sunken cheeks, junkie face. Hair once blonde, doubtful ever nice. Chin with skin problems requiring a surgeon. No pretty to her. No soft.

Face ill-fit. Wrong mask hung loosely on a frame it wasn't made for. Shivered internally and blamed it on the dim light.

Woman, yes, but shabby and soiled, greasy when it's dried, the way bums are.

Tried to smile. Hoped I was. Show her friendly. Might be helpful?

Looked at me like I was something unknowable.

Me, alien?

"You're lost... I can smell your fear."

"Just upset. Flat tire, got mugged. Took all my money."

Face refitted with understanding. "The predators. They wander here. Jackals, take whatever they come upon."

I nodded.

“Is there a phone around here somewhere?” Hoped I didn’t sound like I was praying.

“I have one.”

“I’d be grateful if you’d let me use it.”

Couldn’t follow her thoughts as they wandered. Her mouth widened. “To be parted from these skies... Escape the Cabal.”

Stepped away. Glared at me. “Strange man.”

Me?

She was crazy. The thieves too.

“Cut.” Pointed at my forehead, looked at my split knee. “The blood.” Reached in a ripped pocket and handed me a small black twig. “Chew. Ease your pains.”

Some kind of root. Her clothing was grubby and there were scabs on the back of her hand but I took it. Sour tasting, but if it would help... These backwater New Englanders have old remedies, in the South they have that gris-gris stuff. I took this to be the same kind of thing. They don’t mince words in coastal New England towns and they don’t save useless.

“Come. I live where the wolves won’t come to the windows. Come.”

Paul used to say no option is an option. Asked him to explain it. “Easy, you do it or you don’t. Don’t cancels your ticket. Up to you.” Told him it didn’t make any sense, he shrugged. Guess I saw his point now. Knew if I stayed here I get dead.

“OK. Lead on... *Please.*”

Followed the loose sway of her rags. Turned a corner went down an alley, gap of poorly hung boards and bricks no windows, not a single door inviting come inside. Smelled of smoke. Something had burned here. Didn’t know what but thought is this what death smells like.

“This way. This way.”

“Yes. I’m right behind you.”

“No time for lagging. The widow’s candle-webs... The Vacant walk. Hurry.”

Widow?

“Hurry.”

We did. Turns, rushing along black streets, each as dismal as the last. No sound no motion but our own.

What city in this part of New England could warehouse a dead zone this large? Not a single commercial building, excepting the one gas station, not a factory, nor a cathedral or church to offer heights to unfortunate and not one parked car or truck waiting to whip to faraway's face of capacity.

None of the houses stood over one and a half stories. Not one had an open window, and every clapboard structure appeared to have been besieged by a slow savagery. Boards were age-washed gray and peeling, roof and siding shingles were chipped, curled, and missing corners yet there wasn't a flake of paint or piece of a shingle to be seen on the ground. Overhanging eaves sagged. This wasn't simply a case of deterioration, they looked pecked at too... All movement, every revolution of urgency or prepared seemed to be haunted away by the delirious utterances of a cadaver-voiced broom.

Another corner

approached no strewn no puddle overwhelmed and despondent

no tongue of smoke

... around another.

Dull. Absent map or landmark.

Edge-eaten light, scarce and weak in the atrocity of negation's great black fist...

Wretched, fantasy and any glance toward sequencing's desires flaked away, peeled, some form of bereavement the infecting reality. Situations of poor fact, loud as the notices of any persistent organization. Dingy houses, sentenced to the indifference of slow rot, soften by suffering, always on the one side of the street. The emptiness and vacant lots on the opposite side and where the sporadic, weak light touched the barren lots showed no signs of ever being animated by any sort of construction. There were piles of garbage bags in front of almost every house. I wondered how a place so dead-looking could produce so much rubbish.

Wasn't a single house with a light on. No flicker of a TV to wet deserted with its translucent spill, not one red or blue LED light winking through a curtain. Lampposts, many leaning, every third house or so, but not even half of them were on. Many cities have found the need to be restrictive in tight economic times but this, carved by caustic, was something different.

Like all this blackness has outlawed light.

My confused readied the array of questions on perception's chessboard;
they were ascending, ready to open—

Wild-mouth voices. Chunk of poison.

Grabbed my hand. Pulled me aside before we were stained by light.
Leaned in. Murmured, "Nightcrows. Bad."

"What?"

"Ssssh. *Nightcrows*. The black hand of the gallows grasps."

Handmade infernos. Crows casting gauntlet voices. Porch... a shout
defending her neighbor from a homeless drunk full of an ex's feud... "You
don't want to step on this stoop..." Ex-very, sour: "Go anyoldwhere I want.
No ratpit crack-whore tell mes ca'int..." kicked up to damage, no-speed-
limit teeth ready for meat... not close enough to push but pushing
anyway... then blind-guns drawn... one screamed lovin' you—one barked
never even asked me once—a sing-sing harmonize of four bullets seeking
—goodbye heart—goodbye heartache—fuck you—fuck you back... energy
transferred... scene changed its tongue, two cigarettes lying on the ground
burning but no fingers to play their game... one flat against the wall blasted
in immeasurable, fear can't load her scream. She's bleeding from her belly
—still hungry, still struggling with hate—Gulp, no now to gather. The dark
doorway is cold, silent. It does not want her back.

She took me back a block, headed a different way.

"Bad. All they kiss."

"Where are we?"

Pulled up. Wheeled. "*In it*. Come. Hurry."

"What city is this?"

"They called it Kingsport."

"Called? What about now?"

"Bad."

Right about that.

She was moving. I found fast to match her, wasn't lingering in this
mausoleum... Her and her new-found shadow, moving away from the salt
and damp that had laced the air, rats wheeling—

Alley.

Then a street.

No session of earthly hands.

No bus—no trucks going by—not one person here to bite into with hi—
no survival kit—

NO

—clean and prepared

—no takebacks

—make-up, or crowds sculpted with blue eyes, or street-wide gates with
portraits that aren't afraid of their own meadowlark

—window-shopping, voyaging into the fruit of carved suggestions

—pantheon-dazzle capturing endless seams up the back of her legs

No

No

No

Another alley. Dead. No so blue paradise shore—no bar with pink baby
rose-tricks carving thrush and velvet for reckless—

Another street.

Night leaning on everything—kicking ass, murderer embracing every
step of time.

Stumbled once. This much darkness is a drug, dosed relentlessly can't
keep your grasp on hard and real.

Dogged her to get to arrived.

The clock I heard earlier made another announcement. She froze. Her
eyes reflected the fear that had gripped my stomach when I faced the
thieves.

“Are you OK?”

Looked at me. Glared. Showed me stained teeth. Face screamed, are you
mad?

“The dogs of the Cabal walk. *Hurry.*”

She was off. I kept pace.

“The Cabal you mentioned—what is it?”

“*His* congregation... We must get to the watchtower.”

“Where?”

“Away.

“Them. They seek to fill the frame. When the song ends they will rebuild
their pyramids... When they are no longer quartered in the blue domes and
they leave the pain of their meditations and inherit the treasure... *Every
thought will be a galaxy.*”

Crazy and scary, eyes not a searchlight but in motion like that, maybe she was on drugs? Emaciated, sores, those eyes, could be on crack—they looked like that on TV. I should have just changed the tire and left. I would have been far away from here, wherever the hell here is, an hour ago. On my way to safe.

With Clea.

“Where’s the phone?”

“I’m taking you now.”

Wanted to say about fucking time.

Maze without a sign to read. Over ground that had never known level. Leaving the existence that had lunch, had measurable distance and order and theory. Leaving everything incandescent.

Wanted a bar, not this dumb guide dog. Phone with a voice on the other end and a drink. Wanted to be in a room with shapes my eyes had watched before.

Foundry of dust and null.

“Are we close?”

“Soon.”

Panting. I stopped. “Wait. Just a minute... Catch my breath.”

Her expression mirrored the deathbed face of a doctor.

“What are we running from?”

“Tolone.”

Didn’t get to fit in, what?

“When they first came out of The Curve it was easy they hunted humans... Men... No one can say what became of the women... Then they took what was tossed out, used what they could... But the larder is empty so they pursue.”

“Are you saying someone, thing, killed everyone here?”

“Neas. The brute glamour of his specter-touch. His flock thirsts... Comes like fog to cancel, bag what they exorcise from nerves and blood.”

“I don’t understand what you’re trying to explain.”

“Neas. He is the dreadful—his sour net blames... Mortal leaves. His jackals hunt for him now.”

“But the men who robbed me, and the drunks on the porch, they were men, people.”

“Robbers were wanderers, they come here sometime. Take what scraps they can. There are some *people* here. Few. They hide. Those took the drug, the drink, they did not think. Tainted and unclean. Better dead the way they did.”

Shot is a better way to die? My expression must have said it.

“Better go that way. Neas’s jackals take all.”

“Dead is dead.”

“No. Neas won’t let you go.”

“Your soul you mean?”

Reached up, pressed the callused tip of her pointer finger to my forehead. Tapped it several times. “The spark that dreams. Neas keeps that. Eats all till all is empty.”

Went from hot fantasy to hell to surreal blasted by madness. Swelled with the cause and effect of wild fear, my mistakes or fate was plucking everything I’d hung from the limbs of pleasurable and sane.

“Is he a man?”

“Is Neas. His face is different for every taken.”

“Every *one* taken?”

Nodded yes.

“And you have a haven from this destroyer?”

“The watchtower.”

“Are we close?”

“There.”

Dried out and ashy, three stories of pieced-together cement, brick, and wood leaning toward the frail display of a streetlamp that hadn’t yet forgotten to shine. Roof that hadn’t lost all its solid. Not a house. Industrial once? Barb-wire fencing edging the roof, did the barrier imply military? Still, there was no lookout. No arch or decoration. Three small windows covered in heavy wire-mesh on the third floor. Dense shadows cutting across the base couldn’t see a door to the place.

Staring at the structure it hit me, she was homeless and this was a gathering place where the dispossessed had banded together, their cave to keep out the plague of brutality that scavenged and terrorized by night. A flash of old werewolf and vampire movies from my early teens, standing before that thing I worried being dropped in a box of negligence-unto-death and worse that was not the solution to getting out of this hell.

Couldn't see any wires running from the lamp pole to the building, yet she'd said she had a phone...

Sure didn't like the look of the place, its façade was certainly unwelcoming. Rock and a hard place. Wasn't keen on going in there. Place looked wrong, but out here had already showed me its teeth.

"We go in."

Not a C'mon from her.

Followed. Found the patchwork metal-skin of a door. I was going to need to bend down to get in. So consumed by her eyes and face hadn't noticed before how slight she was. Bent. Old people are sometimes hunched as they walk. Her, something different. More than just bent...

Scrunched up her face, made a short series of oddly clustered growling sounds in the back of her throat and the door opened. A stunted man barked, "In. In." Tugged my sleeve.

Swallowed. Dim. Warm air. A short hallway. No hangings no adornments, not a stick of furniture... Down black staircases. Cracked, spilt old stairs, corner missing here... Kicking up dust. Pushing aside high cobwebs my companions eased right under...

Dragged forward to another set... wood gave way to stone and dirt...

Dank air. Never liked the cellar as a kid, this smelled like it. Made my chest tighten. I shivered.

Another staircase... less stone... impacted dirt narrowing...

Called herself Alice and she was taking me down the rabbit hole...

Last stair produced a very short corridor, maybe better called a tunnel...

A large doorway into a large room. Three mounds of chest-high candle wax with burning candles stuck on the top near the center of the room. Mostly dim to dark. The stench in the room was overpowering.

My capacities degraded by the inadequate lighting and a slight dizziness and numbing which I believed was caused by the root, I couldn't see the corners but the rest of the room was barren.

The doorman led us to a group of perhaps twelve, each raggedy-clothed approximations of one another excepting the slight curve of hips and unremarkable bulges of breast in several, standing by a wall laced with roots and imbedded stones. Nothing casual about the faces that put eyes to

me. My breath was about to birth an earthquake, they gave me the creeps. Alice ticked her head toward me. Exchanges in a language I couldn't fathom passed among them.

Didn't like them, didn't like here.

"Excuse me; you said you had a phone. Is it upstairs?"

The man who had opened the door openly laughed at me before turning to Alice.

"*He* sheds his last season. Prepare the harvest feast."

Some further murmuring in a language I didn't know.

A woman, "Sweet enough, yes."

Hands on me. "Will fit Neas."

"Give to Neas then receive." Widened eyes. Doorman licked his lips. Seen kids look at candy like that.

Staring. "Every drop." Fingers pressed to its lower lip. Fingers aren't dirty. Not dirt and grime, reddish in this light, old blood under fingernails.

Teeth, pulled back the lips of its hungry grotesque mouth, teeth you'd see on a thing that snarls. Teeth—fangs that never took part in tentatively, made for slashing flesh.

EAT OR BE EATEN

Had it in my head. Live gets consumed. Everything gets eaten. Things get harvested to be eaten.

Light-headed. Her root must be a drug. Everything came slow. That was a boon twenty minutes ago.

Eyes measuring me.

The grinning face nearest me sniffing me. Grubby, and it sniffed me?

Faces of dead things, the gravitation of shadows not welcome in the days of flesh. They moved, what was beneath the surface moved, but the skin layered over muscle and bone was slow to follow. Hide of lesions and pockmarks didn't seem to want to heed the cadence of muscle.

Lepers?

Nerve damage and infections did that. Made their eyes like that too. Must have.

Had too.

Alice turned her head. Part of her face didn't adhere to the motion. Her face wasn't her face. It was a covering, curtain hiding a pit. A mask.

Her leathery hand peeled it off.

Take dead, partly rotted, and a bone structure that was fifth cousin to something canine that was her face. Noticed her teeth too, sharp, could snap bone I'd bet.

Saw the meathook.

Her drug-root didn't filter my thoughts. Lightning pulsations of fear walloped me. Graveyard hell. Scenes of sharp assassins that don't bargain, some jungle of teeth offered my heart no quarter. Cut me, carve me, encase Neas in my husk—

Eat what's left.

Hurt, cloudy, perhaps from the root she'd given me, but I got it. Wasn't going to let their plans for history take away my time, twisted from the grip that thought to yank me from breathing.

Slash-shaped voice hissed, "The purification."

Saw a knife—artifact of hidden ages, nothing faded or weak in its resolve.

RAN

No little by little, ran hard—arm, fist, gritty thoughts. Tongues that had trouble balancing human speech pursued me. Kept a firm grip on my pen. Wasn't much, but it might puncture unsavory and widen any chance of getting out if I needed it.

Dim tight corridors... Up stairs, managing to keep my footing in the shadows... We hadn't turned much getting to the room, was almost easy getting back to the door...

Unguarded. Me, dazed, if not drugged, and injured, they may have felt I wasn't going anywhere but on the plate, that didn't slow me.

Was out. Running down the middle of the street. If there were any people here I wanted to find one... Yelled for help.

Running. Belonging to the language of an animal, pain in my chest didn't limit my attempt at faster...

Kept running.

Turned a corner. Broadsided. Saw the reflective bottom of a highway sign up the hill.

Boston 41

Up it—possessed, empowered—hungry for neon, clawing for height, hoping, reaching for spans of trees and a road with lights and a face saying hi leading to buildings with the shape of human and a crash of stories—

Stumbled. Twisted the tender ankle.

Pulled back. The way down—astronomer who lost the contract to his survival kit, grabbing for somewhere in reality. Freefall heat. Banged back to black...

Standing, transferring hellish amounts of pain—

Not steady.

Not getting back up the hill now.

Hide. Rest the ankle.

Lock myself in some house until I can escape. They hunt at night. I'll hide until the glory-flight of lemon sun rises and punctures the glaze of their endgaming.

Got in a house. Dragged my ass upstairs. Small room, window on the street. Reconfigured the back of the peeling door with the measured specifics of dresser and chair and a wall mirror that held no color. Looked at the pen in my hand wished I had a deadbolt and a gun.

Sneaking glances out the window. Ears straining at the dimension below for the incandescent knock of voices. LISTENING. Impatient. No curve of mercury utterances searching...

I can see the way out.

Pause from the gel of scared. Sagging, but orbiting a dim hope.

HIGHWAY

from my window.

Car lights just flashed. Headed to Boston... Where I should be.

CLEA

—seams of her borealis-ladder going all the way up, sitting on my lap. Lightly laughing heat in my ear. Promising—"I'm not wearing any panties." Red velvet lipstick frolicking with my dream—

Not Icarus... Lights, return to gold, the tug of that galaxy—her feathery laugh full-on... Where there's one another will come... Has too...

Will. Will.

Ankle feels better. Maybe? Grasp purposeful with human muscle... I think I may be able to reach... it

stirred by a turbulent desire—

lonely street...

Kingsport.

black wings block my view

Choiceless, the only horizon allowed to sight. The thing's twice the size of a man—parts of it look like scaly meat, but the wings... They're enormous, nearly the size of a small house, a peacock fan of pulsing-black full array. A garbled thunder, voice of the hunter—the thing she'd called, Neas? "It is not ripe." Controlled flutter down its length, something like an arm with a hand-*thing* pointing at me in the window.

Not... ripe?

Jackal-pack shivering. As frightened as I was. Maybe more. Heads down. Cringing. Muffled yelps and whines.

Alice Magg on her knees, forehead pressed to the pavement.

"Return it to the nest." Sounds dry and like its mouth is full of something.

The Neas-thing rose. Just lifted like Superman in that movie. No effort. Wings didn't flutter, didn't do a damn thing. Shades darker than night it slowly faded into the black starless sky.

She peered up at my window. Tears born of fear. Snarled at me. Hate in her cat's eyes. I've been out in cold, blizzard-force winds on the Maine shore. Nothing like this. Terror's cold is deeper, its bite halves, halves again, shatters.

In me. In her.

Thought I'd shatter first.

Clawed hand reached up. Its curse slowly closed, you couldn't have fit atomic particles in it. I got the message. She barked, stormed away. Pack of toxins in tow.

Sun arise.

Up the hill—steep at the top, I crawled. Got a ride. Almost jumped out in front of the damn car to stop it...

I was back in Providence before dark.

Alive. Roiling with stupid half-formed thoughts on how to stay that way.

Back in my apartment—no nest now. Can't snub out my panic, desperation on high alert. Locked and chained the doors. Checked twice, jammed dining room chairs under the knobs. Doors didn't have legs now. Checked every window twice. Left all the lights on.

Twenty minutes later I checked everything again.

Stared at the phone. Wondered who I could call? I remembered that *Equalizer* TV show. Were there people like that, some government agency

you could notify? FBI goes after some of these weirdo cults. Maybe this pack was one of them? Yet, even if there were a governmental limb you could sic on it, wouldn't be some Van Helsing with a clandestine cavalry ride up to put down the savages, and the actor from that show had been in some old movie where he got sacrificed to some ancient deity. Phone wasn't going to provide an out.

I was burning with terror. Blood pressure through the roof, stomach churning, grace-under-pressure pinned under waves of trembling and sweat. Headed to... *stripped from life*. Opened. Over.

Looked at the clock. Once I watched them to regulate my affairs, kept track of departures. Will the thing even notice mine? Will anyone? Tick-tick-tick-ultraprecise repetitions-tick-tick, stupid thing changes, but nothing does. Why did we ever give clocks language? Might be the most useless device man's ever created. Look at it when you're in need and all it offers is empty.

I'll be empty.

Neas said it.

Ripe is for picking. For eating.

It had already started.

No back in the world, felt like I was living in a warzone, infected, can't close my eyes or scratch it away. Just a matter of time before the bomb falls. WHAM. I'm not ready for that shit. Give it to somebody else.

Drank to ease my nerves. Bottle of strength, hell! Didn't help.

No longer a canvas of well-to-do. Frayed around the edges. Just grabbed any old shirt and tie. Didn't shine my shoes. For what, their cell-to-cell repetitions of endangered? Walked through mundane's foolish business like a zombie.

Sleep? Fuck, barely. Only thing in my eyes was tears and a trouble some thought was paranoia.

Count and revise insignificant tallies, throw stumbling reason at statistics, resolve behaviors of trivial in the zoo... Three months later, after two unsympathetic notifications, terminated for *mismanagement* and *performance*.

Only went out when I had to.

Began seeing the homeless everywhere. Skulking. Tattered, soiled, framed by what they craved, they didn't fit.

Which one of them was part of this? That one? All of them?

Maybe this cult was everywhere. An infestation in our cities. Maybe they all preyed on us. Grabbed us when our minutes took a wrong turn or slipped. Every street was a dark theater. A factory. They let us breed. Let their herd of self-fixated, stupid and blind dream and seek and obtain until we were properly fattened.

There were shadows everywhere. All those places I walked or drove by and never noticed, or simply felt were beneath me. Black stretching. Evil. Wasn't just lighting, wasn't a question of urban decay. Something was in the places where the sun don't shine.

Neas.

Waiting.

Spider. Touching the threads of his web to see if this ant or that moth was ready to unlace. Spider, unknowable hunger accelerating. The coupling—no adrift, no drowned, wound my gravity with the fever-weather of its cold river, suck and rake my shivering.

Watching. Orbiting, leaning at me.

They're all watching me.

Bathroom mirror shares awful. Week's stubble. Mustard stain on my shirt. I was beginning to resemble the riffraff. My apartment same. Pizza boxes. Dust. Coffee mugs in every room, some with an inch of cold left in them. Dirty and unfolded in the kitchen and the bedroom.

Down

Headaches. Mad, revolting thoughts spinning. I don't have any memories in my head-first

Down

No safer. No decision or course, full-throated or silent, leads away from the scalding

DOWN

Not a spiral, slow descent. Terror took one piece at a time...

Came out of a grubby little mom-and-pop-mart I would never have entered four months ago. Saw *her*. Not someone like her.

HER

HATE scars you like that you don't forget.

She was across the street in the mouth of an alley—like a rat, hungry black eyes, filled with violating operations jagged and noisy as fractured

modern music, a rat scabbed by some obscene philosophy. Hand came up, grabbed a fistful of skin under her chin. Slid her skin-face down—*OFF*, and leveled that predatory smile.

Almost dropped the two bags of canned supplies I was holding.

RAN

Lock up tight! Check lock and latch and check again. Drawn curtains to blind the probing sight of wild. A hundred times I've thought to buy a gun...

My hermitry is forced. Fuck, I'm trapped. Lavish and its prospects have succumbed to bane and illness. No atoning or miracle will resurrect future.

My Providence is no longer a kingdom—comfortable and gold-plated no longer laugh or declare platforms of glory, God's mercy is a puppet's illusion, it's a terrace of twilight. Barrington River is a sewer. Sky, cobbles and windows are streaked with other rhythms now. I hear things clomp and chitter in the shadows.

I sleep by necessity. Kaleidoscopic nightmares shred me with strange visions. Awake finds me fragile, banished from easy body functions.

My eyes live at my window, chewing cloud and street, a butcher's knife clutched in my grip. Watch. Go out—yes, I carry my knife under my coat, when everything, every crumb, is gone and my hunger drives me to it. There are shadows everywhere, even when the sun burns with noon. I fear corners, fear I'll be opened and absorbed at every turn.

She follows me.

I see his hag.

Cold-hearted bitch-thing makes sure I do.

One day. *Soon? When? When*—"FUCK!" Neas will come—

Black wings—that foaming net, hunger mouth, will open, swallow.

My phone rings. First time in months.

"You've come into my—" The word, bogged down in it, was like inches of revulsion spreading over me—"night." The rattled crust of her hiss dissolves into a chasm of cold laughter.

China Holiday

PETER CANNON

Peter Cannon is the author of Pulptime (1984), a Sherlock Holmes pastiche in which H. P. Lovecraft plays Dr. Watson to the great detective; Scream for Jeeves: A Parody (1994), a blend of Wodehousian humor and Lovecraftian horror with a dash of Conan Doyle; Forever Azathoth (1999), a story collection that was reissued in somewhat different form in 2011; and The Lovecraft Chronicles (2004), a novel that imagines a happier and longer life for Lovecraft.

1.

“SIGN HERE,” SAID THE YOUNG WOMAN, POINTING TO a piece of paper that hadn’t been on her desk a moment before.

“What?” I replied. My wife and I were sitting in the San Francisco offices of Yangtze Travel, where we’d been winding up arrangements for our trip to China with the agency’s pleasant, smiling representative, and now her tone had turned distinctly menacing.

“Sign this statement saying that you will not publish anything critical of the Chinese government,” she said in her slightly accented English. She was no longer smiling.

“Phil,” said Jan, avoiding my eyes, “I told Kim you were an editor who sometimes wrote freelance articles.”

“Yes, but...” I was an editor at *Food Industry Service and Supply*, a monthly business-to-business magazine, which had nothing to do with politics. Likewise, my rare restaurant review for a Bay Area alternative weekly was utterly devoid of controversial content. I looked in turn at each female and decided it was no use protesting.

“All right,” I said, and signed.

On the street outside Yangtze Travel, Jan said, “I hope you don’t mind, honey, but when Kim asked me on the phone about your background, I had to tell her what you did.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Later I felt some regret that I, a citizen of a free country, had so cravenly bowed to this demeaning demand from a petty representative of a totalitarian regime. What I should have done, had I been prepared, was refuse, threatening to write all sorts of nasty things about the P.R.C. if they forced me to sign. Not signing would have been the price of my silence. But defiance no doubt would have meant no visas, and that would have disappointed Jan.

Jan was eager to see China, where her maternal grandparents had been Christian missionaries during the 1930s. I, on the other hand, was too fond of First World amenities, like hot water and flush toilets, to go abroad except to the more prosperous parts of Europe. Furthermore, I was an insomniac who didn’t adjust well to time changes. After some back and forth, I had agreed

with some trepidation to her proposal that we go to the world's last important Communist bastion.

There was, though, another consideration. Wed in '93, Jan and I were still childless after six years of increasingly aggressive fertility treatment. (Jan suspected her hypothyroidism was the biggest obstacle to conception.) China was a major destination for Americans seeking babies—girl babies, that is, since chauvinistic Chinese parents preferred males—and a vacation in the planet's most populous nation might help us decide whether we wanted to adopt there. I still wasn't too keen on the idea, but with Jan's biological clock running out, our chances of producing a child of our own were fast approaching zero.

Another attraction was that China was cheap—only about \$100 a day, which included English-speaking guides at every stop, hotels, meals, and air transport within the country. We could set our own itinerary and were in effect a group tour of two. Jan decided we should spend three days in Beijing, two days in Xi'an, site of the terracotta warriors, then go to Chongqing, where her missionary grandparents had been stationed, to catch a boat down the Yangtze through the Three Gorges, slated to disappear with the construction of the huge dam that was still years away from completion.

In the weeks leading up to our June 1999 departure, Jan in her conscientious way checked out guidebooks from the library on China. Meanwhile, I fretted about getting sick from eating strange foods and catching exotic diseases. What did I know about China, its people or culture? What I remembered, as a boy, was a vertical wall chart in my bedroom of world civilizations from the start of recorded history to the present. Only China, varying somewhat in width over the centuries, ran as one continuous red band from top to bottom.

2.

I TOOK JET-LAG PILLS FOR THE LONG FLIGHT TO Beijing, but I slept only an hour or so. At the airport we were met by a woman we guessed to be about thirty, "Patricia," who escorted us through the terminal to a reserved parking lot. Our car was a black, air-conditioned sedan, up to American-limousine standard. Patricia explained that we should pay the male driver,

who spoke no English, twenty-five dollars a day for his services. We had come equipped with plenty of cash, as we knew U.S. dollars would be more welcome than the local soft-currency yuan.

In Beijing, we stayed at the Rainbow, a first-class hotel with all the conveniences, including cable TV that got CNN. From our twentieth-floor room, we had a superb view of the vast city, diminished somewhat by the gray haze that hung in the sky, like Los Angeles at its most smoggy. The weather was humid and hot, daily temperatures rising to the 90s, comparable to what I understand New York City can be like in summer. Patricia said that northern China was experiencing an unusual heat wave.

The highlight of our stay in Beijing was an excursion to a section of the Great Wall, where Patricia left us for the afternoon. Under a blazing sun, Jan and I hiked up the great, irregular stone steps of the wall. Few other tourists, I noticed, were foolhardy enough to do the same. We had the wall to ourselves by the time several helpings of sweet-and-sour pork I'd consumed for lunch began to churn in my stomach. Fortunately, the next tower we came to contained a W.C.—an open pit that was as deep as the wall itself and, to my relief, almost as odorless.

Each morning we read the English-language newspaper left outside our door, *China Daily*. One article had the curious headline “Over Supply of Ceramics,” that is, “sanitary ceramics” or chamber pots. Evidently, while the supply of flush toilets was barely keeping up with demand, customers for the traditional chamber pot were increasingly scarce.

One night we had dinner at one of Beijing's fancier restaurants, which featured Peking duck. We heeded Patricia's warning not to use the bathroom facilities, as even many upscale places lacked Western-style plumbing. The antiquated Beijing sewer system could handle only so much.

3.

ON THE FLIGHT TO XI'AN, THE NEXT STOP ON OUR itinerary, I was struck by a little incident as we boarded the plane. The female flight attendant standing by the gate suddenly shoved some obstreperous passenger trying to get ahead back in line. It seemed an oddly rude gesture in a society that prided itself on decorum. Over in a second, it nonetheless served to

reinforce my uneasy feeling that the Chinese were careful to present a façade to foreigners, no less artificial than the stylized masks worn by the performers at the Chinese opera we had seen in Beijing.

The Bell Tower, the clean, modern hotel where we stayed in the sprawling, haze-covered city of Xi'an, was, if anything, even spiffier than the Rainbow. Our guide, Cindy, reminded us a lot of Patricia—pleasant, polite, but distant, not someone you could expect to reveal what she really felt about her government or the rapid social and economic changes in China. As an educated, English-speaking Chinese, she was no doubt well paid and had no reason to complain.

Cindy took us, with car and driver, to the site of the famous terracotta warriors. To get to the underground museum housing “the eighth wonder of the world,” one had to navigate a swarm of street vendors hawking everything from cold drinks to terracotta-warrior tee-shirts. At the curtained entrance sat an old man, one of the original farmers who in 1974 had happened upon broken artifacts on the site that suggested the existence of a vast archeological trove. Inside it was cool and dark. We first came to a large round room, where we watched a movie in “circle vision” that reconstructed the bloody events leading up to the construction and later destruction of the army. According to the English subtitles, Qin Shi Huang, the founder of the Qin Dynasty and first emperor of all China, had ordered the figures made for his mausoleum. Over eleven years starting in 246 B.C., his artisans produced more than 7,000 pottery soldiers.

Then it was on to Pit No. 1, an enormous oblong area only partially excavated. A railed walkway ran in shadow around all four sides. Spotlights in the beams of the modern curved roof illuminated hundreds of gray-clad figures (originally brightly painted, as depicted in the film) arrayed in battle-line formation below. Each had an individual face, except for a few wearing bulky helmets that hid the entire head. The army, even in this fragmentary state, was indeed an impressive sight.

Pit No. 2 showed the figures in ruins, as they would have been unearthed. Pit No. 3, much the smallest of the three, contained the officers or “command center.”

The final makeshift, possibly temporary display we viewed inadvertently, through a gap in a curtain at floor level. An ornate human figure, like all the rest larger than life size, stood slightly slumped in a horse-drawn chariot. Was this a high-ranking officer or even Emperor Qin himself? Though the light

was dim, we could see that his face was veiled. Abruptly, a guard grabbed me by the arm and escorted us silently to the exit. I couldn't be sure, but it seemed as if the irregular bulges of the rigid folds of the veil hid some facial deformity. Outside the museum, when I asked Cindy about this mysterious warrior, she paused and looked almost embarrassed before saying that only scholars with the proper credentials had access to certain exhibits. She wouldn't confirm that the figure represented Emperor Qin.

The next day we arrived late in the afternoon at the airport outside Chongqing, formerly Chungking, the Nationalist capital. After meeting our guide, Larry, I visited the airport men's room, which had one Western-style toilet besides the usual holes in the ground. Because of the hour, we would be going straight to dinner. I still felt queasy on the ride into the city, but fortunately the discomfort had passed by the time we arrived at our restaurant, where I was able to consume some tofu soup. The peaches served for dessert looked gorgeous, but, as elsewhere in China, they were rock hard and inedible.

After our meal, Larry proposed that we drive up to the highest point in the city, where Chiang Kai-shek used to live. Like San Francisco, Chongqing is built on hills, and consequently we saw fewer people on bicycles than in flat Xi'an or Beijing. As we proceeded along the steep, winding road, we could peer inside modest Chinese houses without doors or windows. Many people were eating, and we spotted the odd dog or two, presumably pets and not tomorrow's supper.

At sunset we reached the top, where we entered a park that once was part of Chiang's estate. The view was spectacular, Larry asserted, when it was clear—which was practically never. Our ultimate destination was a building on the park grounds that had on display a scale-model of the Three Gorges Dam.

The model proved of less interest than a mural charting the course of the Yangtze from Chongqing to the dam site. By a single artist, it ran more than a hundred feet across three walls. The cities and towns that would be submerged were shown, as well as where they would be rebuilt above high water. Painted in a fanciful traditional style, it depicted rather odd-looking anthropomorphic fishes and frogs frolicking along the fringes of the river.

Since it was nearly 10:00 by the time we checked into our hotel, the Chungking, all we did was go to bed. Before we turned in, I asked Jan if she regretted not having scheduled more time in Chongqing, in order to explore the city where her grandparents had spent several years. Jan, however, had no

idea where they might have lived. Family records from this period were nonexistent. Sad to say, their mission had ended tragically, with the death of her grandfather shortly after the Japanese invasion. Her grandmother barely got out of China alive. Pregnant with Jan's mother, she resettled in New England and would never speak of her China experiences. She died when Jan's mother was small. I met Jan's mother only once, shortly before her early illness and death.

4.

WE WERE UP AT DAWN IN ORDER TO BOARD OUR cruise ship by 8:00. The *Richard M. Nixon* was the flagship of the China-American line that plied the Yangtze. The brochures proclaimed it the equivalent of a four-star hotel. All passenger cabins were above the waterline. While we waited for our baggage to be delivered to our cabin, we inspected the framed photos on the walls of the main deck. These mostly depicted the president of the China-America line, a Mr. Ty, shaking hands with other executives and greeting dignitaries. Once settled in our little cabin, where we stayed until the boat pulled away from the shore around 9:00. Then we descended to the dining deck for an orientation meeting.

Our American tour director, Tim, who looked to be in his early thirties, and his Chinese counterpart, Carl, whose age could have been anything from thirty to fifty, introduced themselves, each in his respective language. Like most of the crew, they wore neatly pressed white uniforms. They alternated speaking, though Tim did so in a halting, nervous manner that seemed odd for someone who presumably had a lot of experience addressing people. He said he was originally from Massachusetts, had majored in Chinese studies in college, and had lived for the past seven years in China. On the four-day cruise, the boat would stop at several places along the river, including the dam construction site. Our final destination would be the city of Wuhan.

Jan and I soon figured out that all the other American passengers were part of a tour group, predominantly female teachers from the Midwest, except for one other couple, Jean and Fred, with whom we shared a table at lunch. Jean, a vivacious type like Jan, and Fred, who didn't say much but looked as if he lifted weights a lot, were New Yorkers. About the same age as us, they were

taking a little vacation before adopting a Chinese baby. Jan was full of questions for them about the process of adopting in China.

I managed to take a nap after lunch, getting up in time for our first shore expedition—to the so-called “ghost city” of Fengdu. On disembarking at what was a modest-sized town, we ran a gauntlet of limbless beggars before getting on a bus that drove us a short distance to a chair lift. One could walk up the mountain on a steep stairway, but no one took that option. At the top was a series of temples, along with the usual hawkers of souvenirs and artwork. A guide pointed out the site high on the opposite river bank where the new town would be built to replace the old.

We took photos of the main attraction, mythical monsters carved in wood and painted in gaudy colors, scattered in seeming disorder in the last temple we visited. Among these were smaller human figures, all suffering the tortures of the damned.

Back in the lower town, we encountered a swarm of curious children. The toddlers wore the Chinese equivalent of a diaper—loose-fitting clothes with a slit at the bottom. One article Jan had read before the trip, she remarked, stated that sales of Pampers had been doubling every year since 1995 in China, though this growth was largely confined to the cities.

At the buffet dinner that evening on the *Nixon*, we again sat with Fred and Jean. The two wives spoke endlessly about adoption, while I did my best to chat with Fred, an investment banker and golf enthusiast with whom I could find little in common. He did, though, crack a smile when I recounted how the Chinese travel agent in San Francisco forced me to surrender my rights to free speech.

It was a relief when the meal finally ended and we made our way to the lounge deck, where about a dozen of us Americans gathered in a corner to hear Tim tell us about the big dam project.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,” he said from his overstuffed chair in a slurred voice that made me wonder if he’d imbibed too much Chinese champagne. “So what can I tell you about the Three Gorges Dam? First, it will be by far the largest ever built, three times larger than Hoover Dam. Along with the Great Wall, it will be the only manmade structure visible from space.”

The pros and cons boiled down to this: The benefits started with flood control. Thousands drowned each year in the spring torrents. Navigation was next on the list. Utilizing a series of enormous locks, ocean-going ships would

be able to pass upriver as far as Chongqing. The hinterlands would be opened to trade. Finally, the dam would produce enough power to significantly reduce dependence on coal. Chinese cities would at last be smoke free—or close enough to it.

And the price? Some 1.3 million people would have to be resettled. The building of new cities to house them all could scarcely keep pace with the timetable for the dam's completion. Invaluable archeological sites would be lost. The ecological consequences could be catastrophic. No one had ever attempted to alter Nature on such a vast scale before.

"Believe me, this is no Communist boondoggle," Tim concluded. "The idea goes back at least to Sun Yat-Sen and the founding of the Chinese Republic."

After throwing the meeting open to discussion, Tim answered a few predictable questions. Then someone asked whether he thought the project was a good or a bad idea.

"I... I just hope it works," he replied, then he stumbled to his feet, muttered good night, and made a hasty exit.

Later, while Jan snored away in her narrow bunk, I got up for a walk. I feared it would be hours before sleep came. Outside, on the top deck where we'd watched the bustle of the Chongqing waterfront that morning, all was blackness. Long stretches of the shore of the mighty Yangtze were empty, devoid of any sign of humanity. The only noise was the steady thrum of the *Nixon's* diesel engines.

As my eyes adjusted to the faint glow cast by the running light on the bridge, I could see the silhouette of another person standing at the starboard rail. I couldn't be certain, but for a moment it appeared as if this person was attempting to lift a leg over the rail.

"Hello there!" I called above the engines. The figure paused. The white of his starched uniform was faintly luminous. As I moved closer, I realized it was Tim, our tour director. I joined him at the rail.

"What are you doing here? You should be sleeping," he said, his voice sounding even more slurred than earlier. Maybe he'd had a nightcap or two after leaving the group.

"I can't sleep. I have insomnia, which gets much worse when I travel," I said.

"I don't sleep much these days either."

"Why not?"

The wind came up at this point, and I had to repeat the question. Tim didn't say anything at first, and it was too dark to make out his features. Finally, he said:

"Ever hear of Innsmouth? Innsmouth, Massachusetts?"

"No, I'm from California. I've never been to New England."

"I'm from the Boston area. I grew up on the North Shore, in a town not far from Innsmouth." He made it sound like an unpleasant place.

"What's wrong with Innsmouth?"

"Not much now, not since the renovation of the waterfront and the dredging of the harbor during World War II. But before then..."

"Yes?"

"Before then, in the 1920s, it was a place hardly anybody would want to set foot in. It was all rundown, practically deserted. Then *they* started moving in..."

"Who's they?"

"You might say they were... undesirable aliens. Real nasty folk. My mom's dad was a federal marshal based in Boston. When he was in his cups, he used to hint of a hush-hush government operation to get rid of these... people. He was sworn never to tell. But occasionally he'd let something slip. It made an impression on me as a kid.

"After college, soon after the Commies decided capitalism wasn't evil, I moved to China. A budding Sinologist I was. It took years, but once I could really understand the spoken language, I started to hear rumors. Rumors that sounded a lot like my granddad's queer tales. Of outsiders that wanted to expand their presence in the world's fastest-growing economy."

"Where do these outsiders come from?" I asked.

"The South Seas in the Pacific, apparently. And when I say the South Seas I don't mean the islands as such."

The wind came up, and I felt a definite chill. It was so much cooler on the river than in the hot, dusty cities.

"Have you ever met one of these outsiders, as you call them?"

Tim's delayed answer was lost in the wind. I had to ask again, and must have missed the first part of it.

"... they've been in China a long, long time, on a small scale. Those of mixed blood live on land for extended periods, though they have to keep close to where it's wet. God forbid that a foreigner like you or me should meet one. Of course, Westerners, until recently, have never come to China in big

numbers, certainly not to the more remote regions. I've heard stories, though, of missionaries and other do-gooders who strayed too far off the beaten path. China has been in such violent turmoil for most of the century, people didn't remark much on such disappearances."

Now I was definitely feeling uncomfortable, and it wasn't from the wind either.

"They were thwarted in New England seventy years ago, but they're trying again, closer to home, now that times are more stable and prosperous. I didn't mention another benefit of the Three Gorges Dam. Its vast lake will serve as a breeding ground..."

Tim stopped, as if listening for something out on the water. But there was only the wind and the dull rumbling of the ship's engine. Again, I lost what he was saying.

"... must think I'm crazy. Why should you believe a word of what I'm telling you? I didn't believe any of it myself, until the day before the cruise, when I happened to pass by Mr. Ty's office a lot earlier than usual. The door was ajar and some instinctive sense made me stop. He was talking to someone wearing a hood, who spoke in a guttural language that wasn't any Chinese dialect I'd ever heard. Then I saw one of the hands, more like a scaly claw... The worst thing was, from the thing's tone, it seemed to be the boss, telling Mr. Ty what to do."

Tim may have babbled on some more, but I was no longer paying attention. I was too busy trying to rationalize to myself what I was hearing, assuming the guy was at least half sane and not totally deluded. Maybe Mr. Ty's visitor suffered from some terrible skin disease endemic to the Far East.

"... I need to talk to you some more," Tim was saying when I tuned in again. "Can we meet at the same place and time tomorrow night? It's risky, but I've learned something else lately, about a specific threat. I have to tell someone I can trust—"

Tim paused, as if listening again to something out on the river, then he was gone. I may have heard the thud of a door above the wind. I stayed alone in the dark only a minute or so before hustling inside and hastening back to my cabin.

WOKE UP IN THE LATE MORNING FEELING FAR FROM refreshed. Jan was sitting on

I her bed, watching me.

“Are you okay, honey?” she asked.

“Yeah, just my insomnia acting up again. Sorry, sweetie.”

“You were yelling in your sleep, Phil.”

“Was I?”

“Were you having nightmares?”

“Not that I remember.” In truth, I had only a dim memory of having dreamed, but I could well imagine the effect Tim’s wild story might have had. Yet I hesitated to tell Jan of our conversation. Maybe later, when I’d had a chance to absorb the implications myself, I’d clue in my mate.

“Since you had such a bad night, I decided to let you sleep late and miss the Qutang Gorge.”

“These gorges are all alike anyway.”

“You also missed breakfast. Here, I brought you a peach. You have to hurry and dress if we’re going to make today’s excursion.”

“I think I’ll skip today’s excursion.”

I found a chair in a shady spot on one of the lower outer decks. Too tired to read, I watched the monotonous scenery slip by. On occasion, the boat would glide past a humble stone house, typically abandoned and in ruins. Few of the ordinary buildings in China seemed built to last, and I couldn’t help thinking that their submersion would be no great architectural loss. I napped fitfully.

Over dinner, folks at our table talked about how abnormally high the river was running this summer. If you wanted to see them in their full glory, you didn’t have a lot of time left to plan a return trip. The gorges would be covered by the new reservoir, due to be filled to its interim level of 443 feet above sea level in 2003, one well-informed teacher asserted.

That night, as Jan and I prepared for bed, I still hesitated to tell her about my unsettling conversation with Tim, perhaps because I had yet to decide whether I was going to meet him as planned. But Jan was soon fast asleep, and I knew that morbid curiosity would ensure my making our clandestine rendezvous.

Around midnight, I slipped into some clothes and made my way as stealthily as I could to the top deck. There I stood at the forward rail, listening to the low thrum of the boat’s engines, my face turned to the breeze blowing across the bow. After a couple of minutes, a figure emerged from the shadows, in his faintly luminous starched white uniform.

“I don’t have much time,” Tim announced, sounding no more sober than the night before. “They know I know. At the very least they’re not going to let me out of the country. When you get back to the States, you have to warn people.”

“Warn people about what?”

“Of course, this is based on a secondhand report—what I heard from a Chinese doctor in Chongqing, an acquaintance of mine, who’d come back recently from one of the rural orphanages. Do you realize that Americans who come to China to adopt don’t get to choose their own baby? The state simply hands you a child. They tell you nothing about the child’s origins. From what the doctor said, though, you can expect to see a lot more boy babies in the years ahead.”

“What’s this got to do with the, er, aliens you were telling me about last night?”

“Isn’t it obvious? They tried the same trick in Innsmouth. It was part of the bargain the Yankee traders made with them on those Pacific Islands before the Civil War. According to my granddad—”

Suddenly, I realized we weren’t alone. Somebody else had joined us on the deck, the engine noise having masked the sound of any approaching footsteps. I could dimly discern another white uniform, but not identify the wearer. “Carl,” groaned Tim. The Chinese guide said nothing, but even in the dark it was clear who was master and who was servant in their relationship. Without a word, Tim followed Carl down below. A minute later, on the verge of panic from some instinctive fear, I raced back to the safety of my cabin.

6.

THE NEXT MORNING I WORK UP FROM TERRIBLE dreams—of things swimming in the river or the ocean whose features I dreaded to look at close up. Jan was holding me in her arms and doing her best to console me.

“What’s wrong, Phil?” she pleaded.

“More nightmares. My insomnia’s only getting worse.” Again, perhaps out of some perverse subconscious impulse, I resisted confiding in the one person who might have been able to put my worries to rest.

I pulled myself sufficiently together to appear at breakfast, though I touched little on my plate. I did my best not to think about Tim's absurd and incoherent claims. Jan and I skipped the morning excursion to a local temple and played ping pong instead. The game did much to calm me down, and I was able to eat a full lunch, including pineapple Jell-O with coconut for dessert.

Meanwhile, the boat had passed through the first part of the Xiling Gorge and docked at the town of Maoping. We crossed a pontoon bridge to shore and boarded a bus for the hour-long ride to the dam construction site.

We stopped at the Three Gorges visitors' center on a hilltop more than a mile away from the site, a vast hole in the earth. Because of the brown haze that hung in the air, the view wasn't all that exciting. Besides, there didn't seem to be anything going on. Our Chinese guide explained that work was at a temporary halt while foreign engineers checked the progress to date. Those in charge wanted to make sure they got it right. Some of us spent more time studying the model of the finished dam at the visitors' center than gazing at the scooped-out shell of the real thing.

After returning to the ship, Jan and I wondered why we remained moored. Normally, the boat resumed cruising down the river soon after a land excursion. We would have to wait until dinner for an answer.

During the coffee course, Carl stood up and said, in his fluent English, that he had an important announcement. Due to the extraordinary flooding on the river, the boat was unable to pass under the bridge that spanned the Yangtze near the dam site. A chartered bus would take us to Wuhan the next morning instead. The trip would last about five hours. He was terribly sorry. Almost as an afterthought, he added that Tim was indisposed and wouldn't be joining the farewell festivities after dinner.

The prospect of a long bus ride the next day wasn't a happy one, but what choice did we have? I tried not to think of Tim, who for all I knew had been bundled off to a Chinese loony bin while we were all at the dam site.

7.

E WERE UP AT 5:30 FOR A 7:00 O'CLOCK DEPARTURE. IT WAS the Fourth of July, and several of the bouncer members of our party initiated some singing of

W patriotic songs, starting with “The Star-Spangled Banner,” as our bus drove out of Maoping on what promised to be a blistering hot day. Suffering from too little sleep, I was in no mood to join the chorus.

Fortunately, the bus was equipped with comfortable seats and air-conditioning, and we had plenty of bottled water. We drove along an empty two-lane highway through a flat, dry landscape until we came to a small city, where we stopped at a modern hotel. Our Chinese guide, Molly, advised us that this would be our last chance to use a Western-style bathroom before reaching Wuhan.

We now entered a region of cultivated farmland, greener than the earlier terrain if just as dull. The trip seemed endless, and Molly confirmed that we were running nearly an hour behind schedule. With the uncertain state of my bowels, I doubted I could make it without another bathroom stop.

A couple of hours later, around noon, we made one. The bus pulled off the road into a parking lot, occupied on one side by an unprepossessing outdoor market. Jan and I first inspected a cluster of tent-covered stalls where a few peasants were buying and selling produce, then crossed the parking area to a one-story, windowless, white-brick building, the public toilet. Guided by the universal signs for female and male, we each entered the appropriate door.

Despite a gap for ventilation between roof and wall, the stench was overpowering. In the murky light, scarcely a single tiled surface appeared devoid of filth. With a handkerchief to my nose, I first secured some newsprint-like paper squares from the communal box near the entrance, then picked my way carefully across the slimy floor down the row to the last, gaping stall of a size to accommodate a large farm animal.

I precariously perched myself on the little pedestal platform above the stinking hole, then dropped my pants. As I squatted in relief, I heard a bubbling, slopping sound nearby, followed by some slobbery grunting.

Then, just as I was about to tug up my shorts, a vile, fishy odor cut through the pervasive cloacal smell. It was all I could do to repress my gag reflex. Then I felt something clammy on my calf—almost as if a hand had reached up from the noisome pit below and grabbed me. It squeezed, I shrieked, I struggled, and in the moment before I fainted, I got a glimpse, as it slipped back into the liquid muck, of *a greenish-blue, iridescent, webbed paw*.

8.

WHEN I CAME TO, JAN WAS HOLDING MY HAND. OUT the bus's front window, I could see the towering new buildings of Wuhan looming on the horizon. Jan murmured in my ear that I had Fred to thank for rescuing me. Apparently, he had just finished his business in another stall down the line when he heard my screams and ran to see what was wrong. He had hauled me unconscious away from the stall and carried me outside. I looked closely at Jan and realized that, however sympathetic, she could never understand. If I tried to tell her what had really happened in that ghastly roadside convenience, she too would dismiss my tale as a delusion or hallucination brought on by the heat, lack of sleep, and repellent but otherwise quite natural sights and smells.

In a state of numbness I got through the late lunch at our Wuhan hotel, our final group meal. I nearly fainted again, though, when Fred casually mentioned, as we said goodbye to him and Jean, that he had felt a bit of inexplicable *resistance* when he pulled me from the brink—as if my feet were stuck in quicksand or, he quipped, quick *shit*. After lunch, I took a bath in our room, fell into bed, and didn't awake until the next morning, despite being assailed by hideous dreams.

Our final day in China, in the company of our Wuhan guide, Tony, I somehow sleepwalked through a series of tourist sites, notably Mao's summer villa, with the indoor pool his minions built as a present but he never once used (besides hating everything Western, Mao preferred to swim in natural settings like the Yangtze River).

Tony was by far the most engaging of our guides, a personable fellow with a sense of humor, who teased us about not having the plane tickets he was supposed to supply for our flight home—which caused me in particular a moment of panic. We deeply regretted that we had almost run out of dollars and had to tip him mostly in soft-currency yuan before catching our connecting plane to Beijing.

In the months since returning to San Francisco, things have been tense between me and Jan. More and more often as we argue she gives me that staring, bug-eyed look of hers that so unnerves me. She's certain that we should adopt from China. She hears such happy reports from Jean and Fred of their new baby girl. Just the other day an article in the *Chronicle* said that it

was now easier to obtain Chinese boys. If being limited to a girl was my problem, I no longer had that excuse... But still I resist, feebly suggesting a Russian boy as an alternative. I dare not confide in Jan my worst fears, for us, for any baby we adopt, and for the Chinese people, who may soon be facing the worst crisis in the long and continuous history of their magnificent civilization.

Meanwhile, I am keeping my promise to Kim, the travel agent, not to publish anything ill of her government, but in the event of my sudden death or disappearance, I leave it to the discretion of my executors whether to go public with an account that some, who don't know what I know, will surely dismiss as a work of uninspired, unconvincing fiction.

Necrotic Cove

LOIS GRESH

Lois Gresh is a New York Times best-selling author (six times), Publishers Weekly best-selling paperback author, and Publishers Weekly best-selling paperback children's author of 27 books and 50 short stories. Her books have been published in approximately 20 languages. Recent books are the dark short story collection Eldritch Evolutions (Chaosium, 2011) and the anthology Dark Fusions (PS Publishing, 2013), as well as The Hunger Games Companion (St. Martin's Press, 2011). Gresh has received Bram Stoker Award, Nebula Award, Theodore Sturgeon Award, and International Horror Guild Award nominations for her work.

THE SUN HANGS LOW AND DROOLS LAVA ACROSS A sea the color of stillborn baby. A dead branch whisks my cheek as I step from the trail onto the beach, and blood trickles into my mouth. The air reminds me of cantaloupes left on the counter too long. Insect wings brush my neck, *a sting*, and my skin swells and itches. None of this bothers me. I'm here, at long last, *I'm here*.

I stand transfixed as the emptiness inside me fills with emotions I don't understand.

Necrotic Cove, where we come to be cleansed and purified.

Tatania says, "Can we leave now? You've seen it, isn't this enough?"

I mouth the word *no*, but I don't think I say it. It's as if I've always been locked outside of the universe, looking in but never fitting in until this very moment.

I gaze to my left and right, where cliffs reflect the sun. The sand spreads like a fan stained by cyanosis, and the water is comatose. This is a place of death, and yet I feel something flickering to life within me.

Tatania grasps my elbow. "Watch it, you're going to fall," she says, and yes, I find that I'm tottering, and I'm so weak that even an old woman's claws bruise me. I squint at her. My best friend since childhood, she'll do anything for me, won't she? Even leave the comforts of her widow's lair to follow me here. Anything to please pathetic Cassandra before my spine finally snaps and the cancer finally eats what's left of my ulcerated insides. I clasp Tatania's waist and steady myself. I say, "My dying wish, and you granted it."

"You're not dead yet, Cassandra. Stop saying that." She drops to the sand beneath the brown entrails of a palm. Leans against the trunk, stretches her legs, flinches as the sand burns her thighs. "Sit beside me, dear," she says.

I do as she asks. I always do what Tatania wants.

"Four hours we hiked, and through a path so narrow a squirrel couldn't make it through." Tatania removes her hat and fans her face. Sweat glues her dyed black hair to her scalp. I have no idea why she bothers to dye her hair, it's so obviously fake at our age. She wipes her forehead with the back of a hand and scratches an insect bite. Her rings flash the sun into my eyes,

and I shift my view back to the cliffs, their coppery sheen far more beautiful than her diamonds.

“I’m not surprised that nobody comes here.” Her laugh breaks into a cough. “The beach smells like a sewer, and the insects are horrible.”

I can’t explain the allure of this place to someone like Tatania. She’s never been empty and alone like me. She’s always *belonged*. Married three times, always to wealthy men, she never had to work, never did much of anything other than make it to her tennis lessons on time, pamper herself with fine food and wine, subject herself to botox, and let the doctors carve her up with plastic surgery. Light blue contacts on her navy eyes. Tatania looks like a parody of her younger self, but she doesn’t realize it. She’s more comfortable at thousand-dollar-a-plate parties and vodka lunches at *Chez Grande*. But she’s always up for a wild time, and I don’t know why, but I needed her to come with me.

“Listen,” I say, “I’ll cool down in the water, and then we can head back, okay?”

Her face tightens into the mock-grimace of the surgically preserved. This is her way of issuing a slight smile of agreement. As she stretches onto a towel, I peel off my T-shirt and shorts, pull my gray hair into a ponytail, and slip off my sandals. My feet are tired from the long walk, my calves ache, but the sand scorches so I hurry to the water, and as only the chronically ill know how to do, I ignore the pain shooting down my legs.

The water quickly sucks me in and coats me with muck. I see nothing through the bruise of the surface, but I feel the fish, their silken gills fluttering like butterfly wings on my legs. I flip to my back and float. Amniotic water cradles me, and the whisper of a breeze, like an angel’s touch, caresses my face. My heart surges as if to the other side of the air. And the pain leeches from my back and legs into the water.

My esophagus and stomach, my intestines: all such a mess, riddled with holes, I can hardly eat or even drink water without the pressure in my ribs and the squeezing of pain through my torso into my back. Constant falls have fragmented my back, the bones so thin they don’t register on medical equipment, the bones like shrapnel on my nerves.

The peace here is beyond anything I’ve known. This must be what it’s like when people find Jesus or whatever other gods they worship. Must be

what it's like when men orgasm, when women feel beautiful, when cats catch mice.

Wide-winged birds float past, and my ears buzz as their notes fall into harmony with my breathing. I pant, and the notes intensify in pitch and go up an octave. I almost smile, I'm so content, but I don't know how to smile, not really. I hold my breath until my lungs hurt, and the birds *stop* singing.

I'm one with the water and all it contains, one with the air and everything in it.

The locals claim that boats never make it to this cove, that the sea rises and swallows them at the horizon. The locals fear this place and are happy enough to stay away. Me, an outsider, just an old woman with nothing to lose, well, what's left to fear when you don't care if you die?

Back on shore is Tatania, rolled to one side, belly protruding, eyes riveted to a paperback rather than the beautiful sea.

My breath spills into the heat of the noonday sun.

My heart pounds in rhythm to the wings of birds and to the gills of the fish.

I doggy-paddle toward the jagged rock towering over the right side of the cove. Peek again at Tatania, sleeping now, her body heaving up and down, and she must be snoring in her "feminine way," as she likes to put it.

The cliffs call to me through the harmonies of the birds and the fish. The rhythms form words I don't know,

F'ai throdog uaaah

and

ogthrod ai-f geb'l-ee'h

I'm not crazy, never been crazy. Even with all the medicine, I'm not the type to let my mind drift into the stupors of drugs or self-pity. I simply stopped caring long ago whether I was dead or alive, which in my case is a form of death anyway. And the stories of this place, the Necrotic Cove, I could not ignore. It is said, by the people who fear this place, that it can devour your soul and lay you to rest. And this is what I want. I don't want to die in a hospital, a nursing home. I want to die on a beach or in waters that tranquilize and numb me, I want to die beneath copper cliffs and a molten sun. Had I told this to Tatania, she would have found a way to prevent me from coming here.

I paddle toward shore, then drag myself to the beach and press my palms against the cliff. The rhythms pound,

F'ai throdog uaaah

ogthrod ai-f geb'l-ee'h

over and over again.

I lift my hands and look at the palms, the dust of a thousand sunsets on them. I rest my cheek against the rock, let it flush my senses. Did Tatania feel this ecstasy, this merging of dizziness and excitement, when she married for the first time, when she had sex with all those men between the marriages, when she got drunk and snorted coke and popped pills, when she partied all night, when the most handsome men wanted her, when she caught the eyes of the bad boys? I've always been alone, not even one man wanted me, so I don't know how it feels to be loved with the type of passion that Tatania has always known. Always scorned, insulted, rejected, and only Tatania has stood by me as a friend. But this place and I, *this*, this is *intense*. This ecstasy, like my head's in the clouds and all I can do is ride the tidal waves crashing down my body. This place and I, we merge as lovers, or maybe as conjoined twins.

Eventually, I pull back, and the removal of flesh from rock jolts me, and sadness floods the space of me that only moments before brimmed with ecstasy. My fingertip grazes the rock, so soft now like velvet, and joy brightens the edges of my darkness. My cheek back upon the rock, and ecstasy thrums through my body again—and I gasp, all the pain vanishing, *for the first time in decades, there is no pain*.

I pull back again, testing, and blackness envelops me as if I've left my first love.

I must get Tatania, bring her to the cliff, press her against the rock, let her feel for herself why I had to come to Necrotic Cove. Then she'll understand the allure. My oldest and only friend, Tatania, who sheltered me when kids made fun of me in kindergarten and beat me up in third grade, who didn't waver in my teens when boys taunted me as uglier than any dude, who filched money from her husbands for me when I lost job after job as the illnesses took root and spread. Dearest Tatania, you must feel my ecstasy now, for if not for you, I would have died long ago.

And so I race to her. My arms and legs flash before me, skinny tubes of flesh bruised blue from the sea and streaked copper from the cliffs.

I crouch, ignore the burning sand, and I shake her. “Wake up, Tatania! You must wake up!”

“Have you lost your mind?” Her eyes slowly open and focus on me, then abruptly, she shoves me off. “Are you insane? Let me rest before we have to hike four hours back to that damn village.” Mascara and eyeliner blotched by humidity and heat. Pancake makeup washed away by sweat, her face mottled by liver spots. The bristles of gray stubble on her chin, the lone hair curling from the middle of her neck.

I love Tatania.

Twins, she and I, joined almost since birth. Her husbands, and all the other men who came and went, mean nothing. They didn’t last. Only Tatania and I lasted, only Tatania and I remain together,

and isn’t that so,

isn’t it?

She drifts back to sleep, as I notice the bumps popping up all over my skin. They’re the size of goosebumps but not distributed in any pattern I recognize. Purple, each one, with a speck of glitter in the center. Perhaps bug bites or an irritation from the strange water?

The bumps are kind of pretty, I think, as if I’m laced in jewels.

Shadows ripple across the sand, and I look up to see black clouds scuttle like giant insects across the sun, streaming from one cliff to the other, then disappearing into the rock.

The breeze is no longer an angel’s touch. It’s rougher now, and the clouds coalesce, and the sky is a blood clot that rips open and weeps, the tears viscous and dark. Could it be that the angels cry for *me*, for *Cassandra*, who never believed in god and angels in the first place?

“**C**ASSANDRA.” MY NAME SLITHERED FROM HIS MOUTH, the monster in a jeans jacket with the cigarette dangling from his teeth. “*The Deformed*,” and a laugh when he shoved me against the cement wall. I cowered as he jabbed me with tobacco-stained fingers, and I whispered “No *no no*” over and over again in the most pathetic way, but he didn’t listen to my pleas, they just made him bolder.

And suddenly, Tatania was there in prissy skirt and shirt with her latest boyfriend, Cole somebody-or-other, tall and muscular with angular

cheekbones and the smug confidence of boys born with it all. I didn't like Cole. He always got in the way of me and Tat.

"Stop it!" she demanded of the monster, this jerk who picked on me because I was so weak. I was easy prey. He stepped back, cocky grin, smoke rushing from his mouth, stinging my eyes, making my throat clench. Coughing, I slid along the concrete toward Tat and Cole, thinking that their names together sounded like a brand of Dollar Store thread. Fancy name to hide something febrile and weak that I didn't think would last.

"Come here, Cassy dear," and Tat hugged me close, and I settled my cheek against her perfectly ironed shirt, pink and smelling like flowers. Her breasts swelled, her heart beat softly against me, and I held back tears and wrapped my arms around her waist and clutched her tight. I never cried. I never laughed. I never showed emotion. Except when I begged the monster not to beat me up.

Cole grabbed the monster's jacket and shook him, but all Cole got for his trouble was smoke in his face and a hard shove against cement. With all his football muscle, Cole was no match for the monster, street lean, mangy, the type who enjoyed a fight more than anything else.

Fast-forward three years, and I found myself at their wedding. Cole, her first husband fresh out of high school. His worshipping eyes, his adoration, "Oh Tatania, so kind, so sweet, the most wonderful girl in the world, how can I be so lucky?" he gushed.

"No, I'm the lucky one, dearest..."

Ooze. Ooze.

Ooze ooze ooze ooze

Would they never shut up?

I didn't see her for a while, he was so high on her due to her beauty and the constant kindness she'd shown to me all those years.

Me.

I was responsible for bringing Tat and Cole together.

When they divorced and she got half of his fortune, quite substantial, she came back to me.

As she always did.

LIGHTNING FLASHES, BLOOD CLOT SKY, SUN NO longer molten. Thunder like 9/11 and the towers falling, a sand storm whisking grit into my eyes. Tatania

L jerks awake and shrieks, “What’s going on, Cass?” She uses my pet name from long ago. “What’s wrong with my skin? My god, what’s wrong with *you*?”

Tatania’s skin glitters with bumps just like mine, except they’re sparse on her and littered across me. I hold up an arm, and the wind whips it back against my shoulder socket. Ninety-degree angle to my shoulder—in the wrong direction—but my arm doesn’t break. The bumps have congealed into gelatinous mounds all over my arm. Mounds that are like muscles, glistening purple and twinkling dots. Mesmerizing twinkle. *Mesmerizing...*

She slaps my face. I feel no sting. “Snap out of it, Cass!” she screams. “We have to get out of here, and I mean *now*!” She jumps to her feet, and against what’s now a stiff wind, forces her withered old body toward the jungle. Her hair stands on end, glued by purplish muck into spikes. Her skin strains against the bones of her face, the tightly stitched skin so smoothly applied by surgeons. Screaming, hands on her face, bloody hands now grabbing for the dead palms.

Lightning cracks the sky and illuminates the copper whorls blowing off the cliffs and dancing with the rain of angels’ tears.

“The trail’s not here anymore!” Tatania, hysterical.

Yes, I *see*. The trail’s gone, the tropical growth burgeons, and coconuts smash to the sand. One hits Tatania’s shoulder, and she falls, still screaming.

I drag myself to her. The wind feels good in my lungs. The coconuts are hollow. Dead. They don’t hurt me at all. But Tatania’s shoulder is broken.

I lift her onto my body, and I slither toward the cliffs. They call to me, those cliffs, in an unknown language like the words of flowers.

Y’ai ’ng’ngah Yog-Sothoth

F’ai throdog uaaah

ogthrod ai-f geb’l-ee’h

Tatania’s body has bumps now, too, and they pulse as they cling in perfect symmetry to bumps on my upper mounds. This is how I hold her, bumps fitting bumps, conjoined twins, glued together now for eternity. Each iridescent globe reflects us both, one beautiful and the other Deformed.

We’re all One, purified and clean, no longer locked outside the very universe we inhabit. Hear the rhythms of the flowers, Old Ones. Hear the song, and feel the beauty.

Y'ai 'ng'ngah Yog-Sothoth

F'ai throdog uaaah

ogthrod ai-f geb'l-ee'h

I must bring Tatania with us. I won't leave her behind.

The rain coats me like oil, but it hits her like needles and pierces her skin. I feel the impact of those needles through her body. I feel the punctures. I feel her wince. I feel the strength drain from her.

I roll my mounds, huge purple slugs glistening with bumps and pricks of diamond, and I hold her fast, my bumps fitting hers as puzzle pieces fit together. I press her against the cliff, where the copper dust blows. She coughs, and I'm forced to detach her from the rock so she can get her breath. She gasps now, sees me, shrieks. And I see her, the face with shredded skin, the contacts long gone and the old lady's eyes dim and dark, one gouged.

What have we done? Tatania, my only friend...

My flesh suckers to the rock, and something pulls me closer, I can't detach, I don't want to detach. For a moment, I struggle against the power of the rock, but in the end, I submit to it and spikes of pleasure wash through me.

Tidal waves of ecstasy, flame consuming my heart, I can't let go of this, I can't, and my soul transcends and surges into the rock, into the rain, into the clouds, everywhere at once, merging with the birds, the fish, the rock,
and

Tatania! no no no no no

Tatania! ooze ooze ooze ooze

and

isn't it always like this,

and isn't it?

Her skin, stretched so thin, bursts open, and she screams once, a flash of a scream, and she's no longer attached to me. My body is one with the rock. Iridescent bubbles on the cliff above me reflect her body as she falls to the sand. Everywhere, walls glow and cradle me in purple and bumps and the musk of rotting lopes and peaches. Pressed inside, wrapped in warmth, I *belong*.

Tatania isn't with us. She's beyond the rock, still on the beach.

I'm inside now, where I *belong*,

inside the cliff, where my bumps swell and cling to the bumps surrounding me. All of us, we belong, one with Yog-Sothoth, who dwells in the higher planes and comes to us in glistening wonder. Behold us, for we are the Old Ones.

We heave, our hearts one giant heart, *together*. We breathe, our lungs one giant lung, *together*. We whisper like angels, we sing like birds, we're softer than the gills of fish.

We are. It's as simple as that. *We are.*

Clasped in each other's arms, bracketed by life and death that no longer touch us.

We are. We give ourselves to the whole. *We are.*

Y'ai 'ng'ngah Yog-Sothoth

Yog-Sothoth 'ngah'ng ai'y zhro

I drift beyond the boundaries of time.

I float in the crevices of space.

I remember things I'd rather forget.

Tatania's second husband, Arnold, the type of man I thought I might finally attract. He weighed about a hundred forty pounds, tall and skinny as a scratch, bald with thick gray hair on his back and shoulders, a caved-in face with squashed nose and rosebud mouth: not a pretty man by anyone's standards. Except perhaps, mine.

But Tat wouldn't have it. She wanted Arnold for herself. He was rich, and she wanted more than Cole had given to her.

I wasn't jealous. I never got jealous. Tat deserved everything good. I was lucky to have her as a friend. She stole money from Arnold, filched it from his "accounts," whatever that meant, neither of us really knew. But I was already riddled with disease and broken bones, and nobody wanted to hire me to do anything, and Tat was all I had.

Faithful friend.

Tatania.

I love you, Tatania.

Over meatloaf one night, Arnold threw down his fork, *plate clatter skit across floor*, and fury in his little knot of a face, he accused his wife of stealing from the company.

Lump of meatloaf choking my throat, *grab for water*, one thumb and two fingers on my hand, my arm a bone encased in scabs. *Slash slash alone at night late at night I slash my arms yes I do and why I tell you why godammit I will tell you*

if only you ask

but you never ask.

“I give all the money to Cass.” Tat’s voice was honey smooth, her eyes soft and loving as she looked from her husband to me and back again. She lowered her head. “I give it all to Cass,” she repeated. “What else can she do, if I don’t help her?” As if I wasn’t there with meat in my throat.

But I don’t mind, I never mind.

“Oh, poor Cass,” said Arnold, immediately relenting, “you are so dear to both of us, and Tatania, my sweet sweet wife—”

And so we replayed it.

“No, I’m the lucky one, dearest...”

Ooze. Ooze.

Ooze ooze ooze ooze

I didn’t see her for a while, he was so high on her due to her beauty and the constant kindness she’d shown to me all those years.

Me.

I was responsible for bringing Tat and Arnold together.

When they divorced and she got half of his fortune, quite substantial, she came back to me.

Like she always did.

I need to belong.

Push

I love you, Tatania.

push

FINALLY, I HEAVE MY BULK BACK THROUGH THE ROCK and pop to the other side, the exposed cliff where the storm rages and Tatania is unconscious on the sand.

I roll her onto me again, my beloved Tatania, and her bumps grip mine, and together we roll toward the crashing surf.

Wave high above, black lip, dog-rabid froth

Tatania flickers in and out of consciousness, face almost gone, lips flapping in the wind, her mouth a giant hole, her teeth bigger than I remember.

Conjoined twins. I won't leave her here to die.

Glued to my upper mound by the bumps, she doesn't wobble or fall as we slide beneath the steel wave and bob on the turbulence.

Waves cresting, crashing, slide beneath the muck and the foam, float float here

where I belong

where we are

My strength flows from my bumps to hers, *conjoined twins*, and I nourish her. Gummy strings, *umbilical cords*, form between her bumps and mine. We bob like this for I don't know how long, and then Tatania's breathing steadies and her heart picks up.

Why have you always been so kind to me, Tatania? I think it, and she answers, "I felt sorry for you. I liked having a faithful puppy. You made me look good. I got three husbands, the money. I came with you to a beautiful island and walked to a beach. I didn't realize it would be hell. You came on a lot of my vacations. Riviera, Rio, St. John."

True, because we've always been friends. I just want her to accept me as I am. Don't want her pity, don't want to be her faithful puppy, just want her affection. If only, after all these decades, Tatania would truly be one with me, nobody else, just me.

There's no hell, Tatania, no life, no death, no angels, nothing. Only that which is elusive and humble. Give yourself to me. Here, drink and let me nourish you.

"You're sick! Disgusting and sick!" she cries, but she lets my energy flow through the umbilical cords and bumps, and then a wave surges and slams us against the cliff. My bumps bolt us to the rock, and Tatania hangs off my outer side, glued securely to me but howling for release. Her fists beat me.

"Cassandra," she spits my name, "you're not even The Deformed! You're a total *freak*, a *monster*!"

The wind pounds me against the cliff, it's a hurricane blasting into the cove, and I beg her,

be one with me, nobody else, just me

admit it, that it's me and only me you love, Tatania.

She's hysterical, calling me terrible names, even worse names than the bullies used all my life. She'd rather die than be anywhere near me. I'm grotesque. She's always known it. *I'm the monster. I'm the reason she lost her husbands, me, all my fault, they couldn't stand being around me anymore, could they? Yes, all those years she took care of me, out of pity, yes, but why does it matter? She took care of me. I'm the monster. And she'd rather die...*

We're held together by bumps. *Only bumps.* I realize there's nothing else between us. Not really. She never saw the real me, and she never appreciated what I gave to her. She always cast me aside for those men, time and time again, she just used me to make herself look good,

and isn't that so,

isn't it?

She was my friend when it suited her. Her affection, it comes and goes. Riviera, Rio, St. John: only when she was old and lonely. She isn't real. She's false and phony. She's *human*.

"I got you shelter, gave you food. I was your friend, Cassandra, and you were nothing but a fucking ingrate monster pathetic whore spawn of shit should be beaten into a pulp you fucking ugly **THING**—"

If I could cry, I would, but I can't cry, so I do the only thing I know how to do. *All my umbilical cords snap like Dollar Store threads.*

Her body thumps down the cliff, tattered pieces snagged on rock, and then she shatters into a blast of wind. What's left of her fizzles into the muck below.

My bumps shudder from the release. If I still had lips, I'd smile. Maybe I'd even laugh, because I get it now. For the first time, I actually get it.

*I belong. She's never had anyone but me. She's alone. She's the monster. She's the fucking ingrate monster pathetic whore spawn of shit that should be beaten into a pulp, fucking ugly **THING**—*

No longer skating through the higher dimensions of space and time and merely looking into the human world, the Old Ones are what matter. We're clean and pure, we're true beauty. We have no need for botox and diamonds and plastic surgeries and prissy skirts and other human nonsense. The Old Ones *are* the diamonds, and the *humans* are The Deformed.

We are. It's as simple as that. *We are.*

Clasped in each other's arms, bracketed by life and death that no longer touch us.

We are. We give ourselves to the whole. *We are.*

And as the winds settle and the sun torches the blackness from the sky, Tatania's remains dissolve, and I slip back through the iridescence and into the cliff to join the others.

The Turn of the Tide

MARK HOWARD JONES

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AT FIRST NONE OF US COULD WORK OUT WHY THE tide was so strange that evening. It rushed at our feet, devouring them in a fuss of foam, when the tide tables said it should have been nearly a half-mile away across the beach.

We wandered up and down the shoreline, scanning the sky and sea as if an answer would suddenly present itself, and we could all laugh and sigh in relief before going home.

But by the time darkness began to close in, and Rosemary had to leave to begin her drive back home, we were still none the wiser.

The following morning, when Kate returned from her customary walk, she was nearly in tears. Ed and I stood and listened, leaning forward now and then to hug her, as she told us of the disturbing flotsam she had come across on the beach.

There was a fish, she said, that was all fins. Just fins and a mouth; no eyes that she could see. It was lying dead by the big rock.

Then further on she'd found two birds, each with just one wing. One was flapping helplessly, cawing loudly in distress, the other was dead. "It was like they'd been one bird and someone had pulled them apart somehow... and just abandoned them. But all the life was left in just one of them. It was horrible!"

After a sit-down and a strong cup of coffee, the three of us bundled up and went down to the beach. We looked for a long time, but there was nothing.

Kate turned to us: "They *were* here!" Ed suggested that maybe another freak tide had come and gone, taking the strange things with it. I nodded in agreement, not believing a word of it.

IHAD HOPED TH AT KATE'S SUGGESTION OF THREE weeks in a cottage overlooking a picturesque old fishing harbour might be good for all of us.

It would also serve to give my ex-wife, Rosemary, a break. She'd been acting as Kate's guardian ever since the accident that killed her parents.

That was two years ago and I could see more strain in Rose's eyes every time we met up.

There was a small gleam of hope in the back of my mind that I might get some worthwhile work done myself. Spending time with two unpaid models (though I was paying the rent) might lead to some interesting drawings, I'd hoped.

But now this incident with Kate had me worried. Perhaps it was a glimpse of what Rosemary had been struggling to cope with.

My pencils and sketch pad remained in the back of the car for the time being.

ON THE LOCAL NEWS LAST NIGHT THEY SHOWED pictures from a farm about twenty miles away. A lamb had been born, more or less inside out. Yet it was still alive, running around in the field.

Ed looked squeamish, while Kate hid her eyes and made little noises of protest.

The item made the national news too. They should have issued a warning beforehand. The pictures were revolting, truly disturbing. Something inside me wanted to scream out at how wrong they were. To me, they seemed to be the worst sort of pornography; nature inverted, mocked, life turned so obviously into a sick joke.

We didn't need our faces rubbed in it, did we?

KATE HAD ARRIVED WITH NOTHING MORE THAN A small bag and a pile of wormy old books, which I presumed were for her thesis (I could never remember what she was studying, but it was something to do with archaeology).

In contrast, Ed had almost filled my car with half the contents of his flat. It was a good thing Kate had driven down with Rose, or she'd have had to sit on the roof for the whole of the journey.

The town was tiny, more of a village really. It sat on a promontory with the old harbour visible from the living room of the cottage. There was a

long, pale gold beach back down behind the cottage, reached by a maze of narrow, steep streets.

It was never really busy, but at this time of year the place had already waved goodbye to most of its tourists.

ED AND I HAVE BOTH BEEN ENSLAVED BY KATE'S DEEP green eyes and sweet lopsided smile. We both do whatever she wants with little protest, knowing that whatever sacrifices we have to make will be more than compensated for by the time we spend with her. Whichever of us she chooses, whichever night.

Perhaps we are both fools. Or just keenly aware of how lucky we are.

I think of them lying together, their bodies smooth and unblemished, maybe sleeping with their limbs entangled. But I don't feel I have the right to feel jealous; she should be with him.

God knows why she's even interested in me, this sad old sack of raddled flesh. Perhaps because, to her, I'm so old that I represent some sort of continuity, the lie of permanence, and the hope that there is something left when the flash and dazzle of youth have gone.

Well, she got what she wanted—me and my nephew together here at the bitter end of summer. I wonder what she'll do with it?

TOWARDS THE END OF OUR FIRST WEEK THERE, KATE spent two nights with me.

On the second night I'd grown accustomed enough to things to notice that when she reached climax, she muttered some phrases in an unfamiliar language.

When we were lying together afterwards, I asked her about it. She was evasive and denied that it was some obscure old European language like Basque or Welsh. Soon afterward we both drifted off to sleep.

The next day I gathered my courage and asked Ed if she did the same when she was with him. He seemed embarrassed and uncomfortable, which was unlike him. He denied that she did. "She just says my name," he

insisted. Though I can always tell when he's lying. Just as I can with his father.

A FEW DAYS LATER, KATE AND I WERE TALKING IN THE lounge of the cottage. She'd been fascinated by reports in the newspapers of the events at the nearby farm earlier in the week.

She said she thought someone or something was changing things, experimenting with them. "You know. Making them better."

I was puzzled how she could think that way, be so calm, after how upset she'd been. I flopped down into a chair. "What? You mean nature?" I asked, knowing full well that evolution was a game played over thousands and thousands of years, not a matter of mere days.

She stood looking at me with her green eyes, clutching one of the old books she'd brought along, her mind working around the idea. "No. Not nature. But something like that."

I puffed in frustration. "There's nothing *like* nature, Kate. There's just nature."

"We don't know that, do we?" she said rhetorically before turning on her heel and walking into the kitchen, my sarcastic 'Oh, I thought we *did*' left unsaid. She added, "I'm going to find Ed," as she left.

She knew he would give credence to her irrational idiocies, if only because he was so besotted with her.

I'M NORMALLY AN EARLY RISER. ED AND KATE ARE not. I had discreetly made sure that Ed and I slept as far away from each other as the cottage allowed, but I had to pass his door to get downstairs.

As I crept down to breakfast one morning I could hear Kate sobbing in his bedroom. I suddenly felt angry that he'd upset her. What had the little idiot done to her?

For a second I wanted to burst into his room and confront him, but then common sense prevailed. I settled instead for some guilty eavesdropping.

The voices were muffled, of course, but I managed to catch a few of Kate's sentences.

"... miss them so much, Ed. You don't understand, do you? I was wrong. I just want them *baaaaack*."

Content that it wasn't Ed who'd upset her, I gathered up my guilt and sneaked downstairs as quietly as I could manage.

LATE THAT AFTERNOON I FOUND ED AT THE BACK door, a pair of binoculars held up to his eyes.

"You'd be better off waiting for dark if you want to catch any unwary blondes stripping off." He ventured a half-laugh but kept the eyepieces pressed to his face.

I endured a further minute of silence, then asked: "What are you looking at?"

He lowered the binoculars and handed them to me, pointing at the hill that rose just beyond the houses. "Up there. Something seemed unusual about that hill. Look at the trees."

I adjusted the lenses for my older eyes and peered up at where he had indicated. "The trees all seem to have joined together in one mass," he said.

I could see the branches wound together seamlessly, one tree becoming another, all moving as one when the wind passed through the leaves. What I could see of the trunks below them seemed to have lost their roundness, flattening out as if reaching for their companions on either side. I couldn't think what could have caused those changes, but something inside me didn't like it.

"One mess, you mean," I said, handing the binoculars back to Ed in disgust.

"Shall we go up there and take a look?" he asked, as I walked back inside.

"No!" I yelled over my shoulder. That was the very last thing I wanted to do.

URING A SOLITARY WALK ALONG THE BEACH BEHIND our cottage, I began to feel a sense of deep unease.

DI'm not given to being spooked, easily or otherwise. For a painter, I suppose I've got a very poor imagination, at least in that regard. But the wind that afternoon seemed to carry on it a scent of something awful, a slight tang of uncertainty, the taint of uncleanness.

I dug my hands into my pockets and tried to ignore it, walking back towards the cramped streets of the town. I noticed that a small group of men had gathered outside one of the pubs on the front, gesticulating in an odd fashion.

Turning to look out to sea, I saw a line of gray clouds settling themselves along the line of the horizon. I was sure they should mean something to me, like a set of signals that are perfectly clear to anyone with any sense.

I disliked the feelings that were tugging at me, so I drowned them in a glass or two of whiskey at the pub a few doors down from the cottage.

MEAL TIMES AT THE COTTAGE WERE A RUDIMENTARY affair. I'd have liked us to eat out every meal, but it was simply too expensive, so I usually shopped at the market every morning.

On the menu this time were lamb chops with potatoes and runner beans. Neither Ed nor Kate seemed very keen on this simple fare.

Eventually I felt compelled to ask if there was anything wrong with it. They both shook their heads, but there was evidently something wrong with something, even if it wasn't my cooking.

"Ed keeps going on about the 'weird things' happening. He keeps trying to explain them away and I just think he should just shut up," blurted Kate after a short pause. He looked across at her, peeved.

"Weird things?" Even though I'd asked, I knew perfectly well what they meant. But it might give them a chance to clear the air.

Ed detailed the catalog of unusual things we'd witnessed, discreetly leaving out Kate's odd orgasmic utterances.

"Hmmm. I see what you mean," I said.

“Well, I just don’t think they add up to a pattern like you do, that’s all. Taken in isolation, they wouldn’t seem so ‘weird’ after all. They’re just coincidences,” he said.

Kate laughed, obviously unimpressed by his argument. “Maybe it’s... a warning. Maybe the world has finally had enough of us. Maybe this is the way things are supposed to be.” There was a look very like triumph on her face.

Ed turned to look at me, and there was genuine fear in his eyes. Maybe it was the implications of what Kate had said, that the world he was so sure of would now become unrecognizable. Or perhaps it was the fear that she might simply be losing her mind; that he might be losing her.

I could offer him no answers and turned my attention to the undercooked runner beans on my plate.

EVEN THOUGH THERE WERE ONLY A FEW YEARS between Ed and Kate, it seemed like a gulf at times. They were both bright, of course, but she sometimes seemed as if she was made of different stuff to him.

He was already working in my brother’s law firm and was beginning to make a name for himself. But he found Kate’s moods unfathomable. It made me chuckle sometimes to see him struggling with her, particularly as his befuddlement meant she’d soon be seeking solace in me.

I suppose I must have a streak of sadism in me somewhere.

THEY HAD BEEN ARGUING ON AND OFF ALL MORNING. Kate was adamant that there was “something” abroad causing all the strange phenomena that seemed to have haunted the summer so far.

Ever rational, Ed demanded that she agree that it might all just be a huge coincidence.

I dragged them into a small corner shop and bought ice cream for us all in an attempt to cool things down, literally. It didn’t seem to work.

Ed decided to throw down a fresh challenge. “All right, all right... If there is some ‘evil genius’ at work, why haven’t they shown themselves?

Why are they so shy?”

Kate was gazing out at the sea. “What if we’re looking at them right now?”

Ed looked puzzled.

“I mean, what if they’re there? Just above the surface of the water, but we just can’t see them?”

Ed shook his head. “But where would these giant invisible ‘things’ have come from, Katie?” He only called her Katie when he was very annoyed with her.

“Well, maybe they’ve always been here, but they’ve only now woken up from a long sleep and here we are... everywhere... and everything’s changed. And maybe they don’t like that. You’ll see.”

She fished a few stray strands of auburn hair out of her mouth with her long fingers. “And don’t call me ‘Katie’ like that!”

I tried to remain as nonchalant as I could, licking my ice lolly, doing my best to look as if I was ignoring a little lovers’ spat. Though nothing is ever that simple with us.

We continued rambling along the side streets of the town. When Kate disappeared into a junk shop, I drew Ed aside, pretending to draw his attention to a box of books out front.

But when I suggested Kate might simply be letting her imagination get the better of her, he seemed outraged at my interference (that’s what he called it—“interference”!) and stalked off into the gloom of the shop, following her.

Ed seemed aloof with me for the rest of the day, and he and Kate went off for a drink on their own that evening. I had dared to criticize his goddess.

I was evidently asleep when they returned. The next day I kept myself to myself. At least until the afternoon.

A SUDDEN COMMOTION FROM THE KITCHEN INTERRUPTED me halfway through the sixth chapter of Vian’s *Autumn in Peking*. I put the book down and went to see what all the fuss was about.

Ed was kneeling in front of Kate as she sat on a kitchen chair, tears running down her cheeks. He dabbed delicately at the soles of her feet. She

was dressed as usual, in a skimpy top and some shorts.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, gazing down as he bathed her feet like a character in a Bible story. It would have made a very bad Victorian painting.

“Kate’s feet are all cut up,” said Ed, matter-of-factly.

Kate sobbed. “The beach was all hard. It had turned to glass. I felt the sand cutting me and tried to get back to the road. It was huh-huh-huh...” Her words became lost in more sobbing.

I patted her shoulder in comfort and bent to look at her feet. The soles were covered in tiny cuts, weeping blood.

“You must have trodden on some glass,” I said, trying to brush off the impossibility of her words.

Kate continued sobbing. “Nuh-no. It was *all* glass!”

Ed held out the blood-stained towel for me to see. Sure enough, there were a few tiny fragments of glass glistening among the drying blood, but that didn’t confirm Kate’s story.

I felt it was my job to nod in a reassuring manner.

After we had both sat comforting Kate for a while, I left Ed to take care of her. I put my jacket on and headed down to the beach. Even after the recent strange events, I hoped to find a rational explanation for the state of Kate’s feet. There would be a broken bottle that had been ground against a rock, the sharp detritus then scattered unnoticed across the sand, I was convinced.

But as I walked down the few steps from the road onto the beach, I noticed the sand made an unusual crunching sound under my shoes.

The place was deserted except for me. I knelt and gingerly rolled a few grains between my fingers. Instantly, blood appeared.

Wiping my hand very carefully with my handkerchief, I flicked off the last few grains clinging to my skin or stuck in the pooling blood. One or two grains remained on the white cotton handkerchief, and I examined them closely. They glistened like tiny diamonds in the morning light. They were glass.

The whole beach beneath my feet seemed to have been turned to glass. It was a hideous impossibility, but the stinging in my fingers told me it was true.

Walking on a few steps, I could see that tiny creatures were stuck in the shining sands. Half kneeling, I saw they were some kind of mollusc, but one I'd never seen before, with a longish shell from which emerged tiny tentacles; all made of glass.

My head began to spin. I stood up and it seemed as if the very skin of the world crawled with horror beneath my feet.

I steadied myself against a rock while I examined the sole of my shoe, pulling my hand away quickly at the strange sensation beneath my fingers. I peered at it, but the rock looked the same as it had yesterday, when I'd passed it while out walking.

My exploring fingers soon found that it was soft, yielding easily beneath even a very slight pressure. It had become like a giant sponge, discarded on the beach by a careless bather. Stepping back, I wiped my hand on my trousers. There was nothing on my fingers, not even water, but I wiped them again, just to be sure.

I walked further down the beach, wondering what the hell was happening to the world around me. Or happening to small pockets of it, at least. I briefly imagined it might be some sort of previously unknown pollution; God alone knew what monstrosities industry or the government cooked up in their labs, or what by-products they dumped in the water. I nearly sniggered at my own paranoia.

After several minutes, I turned to look back at the town. Then I noticed there was a track across the beach. It was wide and slightly discolored, cutting across the sand and part of the rock I had leant on earlier. As if something had passed this way, just as someone walking through tall grass leaves a trail of bent stalks behind him.

Squatting, I examined the sand at my feet. Just sand.

Later, when I was back on the beach road, I examined the soles of my shoes. Just like Kate's feet, they were tattered and torn.

Looking down on the beach, I could see the discoloured path clearly, stretching from the tideline to the sea wall. Yet the road was completely unaffected.

HATEVER IT WAS, WHEREVER IT HAD TOUCHED nature, it had changed it. Man's world, his structures and roadways, had remained untouched. But they too

Were made of natural materials, simply rearranged—how could they be anything else?

Perhaps that process of man-made change had granted them some immunity; maybe there was an unknown law that said only one metamorphosis of certain materials was allowed to take place before they became fixed forever.

But we hadn't been changed. We were still just animals. Everything about us bore the stamp of nature. I felt cold and very small suddenly as I wondered how long it would be before one of us *was* "changed."

KATE HOBbled AROUND GINGERLY ON BANDAGED feet for a day and a half. Her wounds healed astonishingly quickly. I supposed that the cuts had only been very shallow.

Ed was very solicitous, as I'd expected he would be, hovering around her, organising things, and never leaving her alone for a second.

I felt left out of it all and spent most of my time alone, reading.

Thinking back over the last few days, of how different things felt, I couldn't help thinking that for so long the tide had been going out. But now it was coming in and we were right in its way.

ITRIED TO GET OUT OF BED WITHOUT WAKING KATE, hoping I could move my arm slowly enough not to disturb her. It was all I could do to stop myself from tracing the line of pale freckles on her left cheek with my finger, wanting to join the dots before kissing her on the nose as usual.

When I finally managed to extricate myself, I pulled the sheet back over her so she wouldn't get cold. It was then that I noticed the skin on her throat had become coarse and red. Strange that I hadn't noticed it before.

Over breakfast later I asked her about it, and she insisted it was a flareup of her eczema. Shortly afterward she disappeared into her room and came

back wearing a silk scarf. I hadn't meant to embarrass her and tried to reassure her. But she insisted on wearing it all day long.

I PHONED ROSE TODAY. EVEN THOUGH I HADN'T intended to before I spoke to her, I asked if she could manage to come down earlier than planned. She thought I was talking about a few hours, but when I said I thought it would be better if we left four days sooner, she was unsure whether she could make it.

"But why do you want to come back four days early? What's wrong?"

I made up some nonsense about us not having a good time and told a half-truth about Ed and Kate arguing all the time. But there was no real reason, of course—at least, nothing I could put into words—so we left things as they were.

When I'd heard Rose's voice on the other end of the phone, it had been a straw that I knew I had to clutch at. I'd had an unusual feeling of unease at being in this place. I felt only she could rescue me; all of us. From what, I didn't know.

I KNEW IT WAS A DREAM, BUT IT FELT LIKE ONE OF those lucid ones, where you think about waking up and then you do. Except that it didn't work this time.

Ed and Kate were at my side as I walked down the narrow main street of the town that led to the sea. But things weren't quite right, I felt.

Then, asone woman walked towards us, she began to blossom with strange fleshy growths, her skin stretching hideously. It was as if the meat she was made of was imitating things that had no business being on a human being, transforming her into a walking tree of flesh.

Around me everyone seemed to be going through a similar transformation. A man with enormously long arms tried to wave before being weighed down by the bulk of his obscenely unnatural limbs, laughing as he tumbled forward.

Another man seemed to be dragging his family along behind him, a woman and two children becoming lost as they grew into him, his face changing to become them as well as himself.

Two women who had been talking began to meld with the building they were standing in front of, just as a decorative bush nearby grew through them and took parts of them with it as it left.

I couldn't decide whether these people were becoming more or less than human. Even the seagulls overhead seemed to have been affected, their cries becoming chilling and unearthly.

Everything was becoming mixed up. There was a fine mist of blood in the air, and I panicked at the thought I might breathe it in. So far I had avoided the changes being wrought around me, but this mist might be the catalyst.

I felt as though I wanted to run, but something prevented it. I was forced to carry on walking at my normal pace as if all this was inevitable, as if something didn't want me to be spared the fate of these others.

In a doorway, a limbless shape huddled in a corner, trembling and threatening to become something even more repellent.

We were nearly at the seafront now. I had deliberately not looked at my two young companions, fearing the changes that might have occurred. But now Kate turned to me and smiled with what her mouth had become. I couldn't scream. "Wonderful, isn't it?" she asked. Then she pointed to the sea and said, "Look!"

I looked but couldn't see anything. There was something there, though; I could feel it—something gargantuan. The water parted as something unseen rose from it, enormous and overpowering, threatening to crush our minds as well as our bodies. Although I knew I would be prevented from doing so, I tried again and again to turn from it...

I woke sweating and kicking, moaning incoherently. The things I'd seen still seemed to be there in the dark, holding back, staying just outside my vision. I sat up in bed and strained to see into the darkness, trying to penetrate it and make the shapes appear.

The dark had never held any fears for me, even as a child. But now I felt like a child, sitting there afraid to get up and put on the light in case whatever was in the blackness seized its chance.

As the sweat cooled, I began to shiver. I gathered my courage and leapt out of bed suddenly to flick on the light. Those two short steps to the light switch seemed to take longer than anything I'd ever known.

There was nothing hiding in the dark. I went through to the kitchen to make some coffee.

I sat alone in the dark for a few hours, sipping coffee and wondering what on earth I was thinking in agreeing to come here. The old saying about there being no fool like an old fool had been proved agonizingly correct. I was just in the way.

Then there was the feeling that Kate *knew* something or was somehow drawn here. I had no idea what her game was, beyond the obvious one of having two men attending to her whims, but I determined to challenge her about it in the morning.

On returning to bed I eventually managed to drift off for a few fitful hours. They were mercifully free of dreams.

I WAS AWOKEN RUDELY BY ED BURSTING INTO MY room just after seven without knocking.

"She's gone!" he yelled. It took me a few seconds to drain the last dregs of sleep and find my way to the waking world. The uneasy feelings left by my earlier dream still clung to me.

"Wha—? P'raps she's just gone out for a walk," I offered. Ed seemed convinced otherwise and kept shaking his head. "She was strange last night," he said. Despite myself, I snorted in derision.

He continued: "She kept talking about the sea. And how she now knew what she had to do. I was so tired that I didn't take any notice of it."

As soon as I'd pulled some clothes on, we ran down the steep street at the back of the cottage. A kind of shared instinct told us where she'd gone. Above us, the perfect cloudless sky threatened to tilt forward, spilling out whatever lay behind it, to bury us forever.

When we reached the beach we stood panting, our gazes sweeping the sands for any sign of Kate. There was nothing, and I was unsure whether to feel panic or relief.

The sea was unusually calm, as if a storm had recently passed over. But if there had been a storm, it was unseen and unfelt by the inhabitants of the town.

I walked along the beach for a short distance, then stopped as I noticed something lying by a large rock. I called Ed over.

We looked down at the pathetic pile of fabric scraps for what seemed like several minutes, not wanting to acknowledge the awful implications. She was gone.

Then we saw the line of footprints that led across the beach. They struck me as strange, as if Kate had been moving in a manner other than her usual elegant gait. They stopped several yards short of the high-tide mark. It was as if she had suddenly jumped into mid-air, leaving no trace behind her. Or ascended heavenward like some ancient mystic.

Ed and I stood side by side on the shore, staring out at the secretive sea as it held its tongue. She was out there, we both knew it. She had to be.

I just hoped that she had changed, become “better” as she would have put it, because God help her if she hadn’t.

Weltschmerz

SAM GAFFORD

Sam Gafford is a fiction writer, literary critic, and publisher. His fiction has appeared in Black Wings and other venues, and his criticism in Lovecraft Studies, Studies in Weird Fiction, Crypt of Cthulhu, TAPS Magazine, and elsewhere. With S. T. Joshi, he has compiled a bibliography of William Hope Hodgson. He is working on a supernatural novel about Jack the Ripper and a critical study of Hodgson.

I WOKE UP ALIVE AGAIN TODAY.

Looking up at the bedroom ceiling, I silently cursed the fact that I hadn't died in my sleep. I awoke to another day in the same hell as always: facing a lifetime of days to come exactly like this one. Scratching my head, I swung my feet out of bed onto that tan carpet I hated so much. I shut off my alarm, and the sound of Ann snoring filled the room. I looked over at my wife. As usual, the covers were over her head and she was just an amorphous blob.

It was the same as every morning had been for the last twenty years: I got up, shaved, took a shower (being careful not to use all the hot water). Gulped down a few bites of something; didn't matter what it was. All done as quietly as possible. After I got dressed, I looked back at Ann. She was still asleep and snoring. Twenty years ago, I would have woken her up to kiss her goodbye. Now there didn't seem to be much point.

It was a cold October morning and neither the car nor I liked it very much. The engine struggled to turn over, but it was an old car so that was just to be expected. We couldn't afford to buy a new car, so I was stuck with one that was outdated ten years ago. I shifted it into gear and it started moving slowly. The cassette player had been broken for a while now, so I had to make do with the inane chatter of morning radio. From there, I parked at the usual commuter lot and took the bus into Providence.

Buses are unusual places. People thrown together for a short period of time tend to show their differences. Some, like myself, sit in stony quiet, anxious for the trip to end. Others become loud and boisterous, insistent upon being noticed and heard. On any given day, I can learn about any number of private lives through one-sided cellphone conversations. Love, sex, hate—all through a phone. And the homeless are either frighteningly silent or willing to debate politics with anyone who dares to disagree with them. I close my eyes and try to decipher where the bus is by the turns and movements. I've gotten pretty good at it. I can pretty much tell where I am at any point on the ride from Warren to Providence. Sadly, this is often the highlight of my day.

Once the bus arrived at Kennedy Plaza, I avoided the traffic on my way to the Fleet Bank building. Once it was the Hospital Trust building. Before that, it used to be the Old Stone Bank building. I've come to realize that my life is marked by remembering where things *used* to be. Once inside, I signed in, took the elevator to the third floor, and punched my code into the keypad to open the door to the Dividends and Securities Department. I sat down at my desk, four rows down and

two chairs to the left, and logged into the computer. I nodded a silent “good morning” to my fellow prisoners and opened up my work for the day.

My cubicle in hell is a clean one. All the files and printouts are in order in plastic holders on my desk. The desk drawers hold only what is needed. A few historical reports in cardboard covers take up the bottom drawer. The second holds my employee handbook. Updated every year and never opened otherwise. The small top drawer holds the few stationery items I use: pens, paper clips, tape, scissors, staples, and a few candy bars for the afternoon lag. On the top of my desk is only my computer monitor, keyboard, mouse, phone, and the plastic file holder. No photos. No doodads. No mementos. There’s no rule against them. Flexman, who sits in the desk behind me, has framed pictures of his wife, his kids, a “world’s greatest dad” award, a rock that he brought back from a beach in Hawaii, and a little plastic square that says “Jesus loves you, but I’m not Jesus.” I used to have a picture of Ann on my desk, but that was a long time ago.

I suppose cubicle is the wrong way to describe our situation. A “cubicle” suggests walls that separate every work station. We have no walls. There are rows of desks, set in pairs. From where I sat, I could see across the room in every direction. There were maybe twenty rows and six columns of desks. I never bothered to count them all. To the right, near the front of the room, were the two managers’ offices. They were the normal type of office one sees in a bank. Nothing particularly special, but they were made that way so that the inhabitants could be interchangeable. In the fifteen years since I’d been in that department, there had been five different people in those offices. It would take quite an effort for me to recall all their names.

The current manager was Tim Sympkof, who clearly saw the department as only a quick stop on the way to something better. He rarely bothered to talk to any of us and spent most of his days in his office, listening to one of those digital radios. The only time Sympkof came out of his office was if any of the executives came into the room, which almost never happened. Most of the time, Sympkof left the running of the department to his assistant manager, Harry Helger, who’d probably been with the bank since the first account was opened. Harry was nice but essentially useless. He’d managed to keep his job by not making anyone mad and, basically, no one wanted his job anyway.

Through the years, the number of the people in the department wavered. When I first started, nearly every desk was full. Now, with the economic “downturn,” only about half the desks were being used. The work hadn’t decreased, only the number of people to do it.

My job was handling dividends. I tracked securities and verified who was holding what and how much they were due. It was tedious and laborious and mind-numbing. If anyone ever says that they love accounting, then you know you are dealing with a liar. No one loves accounting any more than anyone loves cleaning out toilets, but it's something that needs to be done and it drives every aspect of the economy. Still, you'll never see a television commercial bragging about how exciting it is to be an accountant. There are no television shows about accountants solving crimes. Even truck driver school commercials look more exciting.

When I started, we still did everything by hand. Slowly, everything changed over to computers with new programs and e-mail and the like. I'd always been good with such things, so I picked them up pretty easily, which is probably how I managed to hold on to my job. All our computers were connected to the mainframe and we had access to e-mail and Internet, but we were constantly monitored. I could get around the spyware the bank put in but never bothered to. There wasn't much I wanted to spend my time looking at. Flexman was different, though, so one afternoon I set up his computer so that he could surf the Web as much as he wanted without anyone knowing. I mainly did it so he'd stop talking to me so much. But, after I did that, he came to me with any computer problems... and he always seemed to be having problems.

"Hey, Doug," he whispered to me, "my computer's doing it again."

I turned and looked at him and he pointed at his monitor.

Sighing, I stood up and went and looked. The screen had several pornographic sites open. "I told you to be careful what you looked at."

Flexman laughed. He was a big man and his smile could take up half his face. The fact that he was black never made much difference to me. Black, white, Asian, whatever. We're all just as pointless.

The computer was locked. Somewhere there was a virus trying to get through.

"I'm going to have to shut this down. You're going to lose any work you had."

He moved aside and I pressed the right buttons in the right order and the screen went black. Five seconds later, the Microsoft Windows logo came up. I bypassed the log-in and opened the programs. "There," I said, "you should be all right now."

"You da man, Doug! You got, like, a gift with computers. Why don't you go into programming or something?"

"Oh, yeah, right. Go into the only other field that's as boring as accounting? No, thanks!"

As I looked up from Flexman's monitor, I could see there was a girl pushing a cart in the middle of the room. She was one of the "runners": people who 'run' things from department to department that can't be sent via e-mail. There aren't as many of them as there used to be. She was thin and young. Maybe twenty-two at the most. Her hair was straight, shoulder-length, dark with a streak of bright red dyed in the front. Her lips and breasts were full, and I could have sworn she was looking at me. She threw a package in her cart and left the room.

"Who's that?" Flexman said.

I went back to my seat. "Just some runner," I said. "She'll probably quit by the end of the month like they all do." Punching my keyboard, I got back to work looking at the endless series of numbers.

AT LUNCHTIME, I LOGGED OFF MY COMPUTER AND headed to the cafeteria. Fleet was one of the few places I knew that still had a cafeteria for their employees, and almost everyone used it. Situated on the fourth floor, it took up a large area and was designed with large windows that looked out over Kennedy Plaza. The place was always crowded and table space was usually at a premium. I sat down in my usual place; table for two, near the back wall, in a corner away from the windows. Around me, the tables filled and people came and went. It was like high school all over again. The tellers ate with the tellers, the managers ate with the managers, departments grouped together, and there was not an executive in sight. They ate in their private dining room upstairs on the tenth floor with their own kitchen staff. I'd heard that the food there was much better than what we were given here.

I took out my lunch and started to eat. It was plain turkey on white bread. No lettuce, tomato, or mayo. A small bag of chips with a bottle of water and some baby carrots finished the meal. I never brought anything to read. I'd never be able to concentrate with all the noise around me, and I hated to start reading something knowing that I was on a time limit. Never was one for reading newspapers either.

"This seat taken?"

It took a second before I realized that someone was speaking to me. That never happened.

I looked up and it was the "runner" from before. She had a tray with something that pretended to be a hamburger but was probably more akin to a circle of cardboard. It was covered in cheese, lettuce, onions, pickles, and some oddly

colored sauce. A tray of nachos was the side order and looked to have just about everything on it possible.

She was smiling and I could see that her nose had been pierced.

“Hello? Can I sit here? There’s no other seat available.”

I could see several seats empty behind her.

“Um... sure. If you like.”

“Thanks! Been a fucking long day already.”

She sat down and immediately began to eat. There was a certain amount of animalistic joy in the way she attacked her hamburger. “I’m Maya, by the way.”

I nodded. “I’m Doug. Doug Marsden.”

She was wearing a thin shirt with mid-length sleeves. It was warm out, so they had the air conditioning on full-blast. I could tell that she wasn’t wearing a bra as two points started to rise up under her shirt. There was a hint of tattoos on her arm.

“So what do you do here, Doug?”

“Me? I... I work in Dividends and Securities.”

She smiled. Her top lip turned up slightly. “Crap, that must be boring. How do you stand it?”

I nodded. “Well, you know, it’s a job.”

She scoffed. “I think I’d put a needle through my eye if I had to do that all day long.”

As she ate, I looked at her more closely. Her hair was dyed black except for the streak of red in front. I couldn’t tell if the red was her real hair color or not. Her ears were each pierced several times, and I unexpectedly caught myself wondering what else was pierced. Her eyes were green and her skin was soft and pink. Although not unhealthy, I doubted that she spent a lot of time in the sun. I think she caught me staring but didn’t say anything.

“And what do you do, Maya?”

“I just started in the mail department. I’m a runner, you know. It keeps me busy. But I’m really a musician!”

“Oh?” I asked.

“Yeah, got a few things up on YouTube, y’know? All my own songs and everything. Look me up under ‘Mayakeyes.’ I’m looking to get something going.”

I made a mental note for later and finished eating my sandwich.

Maya polished off her burger and started on her nachos.

“You don’t talk much, do you, Doug?” she asked.

I looked up, startled at the question.

“Uh, no, not too much.”

“That’s all right. I like the strong, silent type.”

She put her hand on mine. There was still cheese sauce on her fingers and I could feel it oozing between mine.

Near the windows, I could see a bunch of people from the mail room eating their lunch. There were several empty chairs.

“Are you sure you don’t want to sit with your friends from your department?”

Maya looked over. “What? Them?” She scoffed and turned back to me. “Nah, they’re boring. Insignificant assholes, the bunch of them. They’re just too fucking stupid to realize it. But I’ve got a feeling about you, Doug, I think you *get* it. I can see it in your eyes.”

She lifted her hand up, tracing her finger along the edge of my hand, and stood up. Maya stuck her finger in her mouth and sucked off the cheese. “Gotta run. Same time tomorrow, Doug?”

Without waiting for an answer, she turned and walked over to the trash and emptied her tray. She looked back at me and waved as she walked out of the room.

I sat there, feeling vaguely unsatisfied with the remainder of my lunch.

FOR THE REST OF THE DAY I STRUGGLED TO CONCENTRATE on my work. I found myself looking up every time someone came into the room.

On the bus home, I miscalculated my position three times.

As I walked through the door, my phone beeped at me annoyingly. Ann had sent a text saying that she had to go to a church meeting tonight and I’d be on my own for dinner. I threw a frozen pizza in the microwave and ate it in front of a television that I wasn’t watching anyway.

I sat down at the computer and tried to remember what Maya had said. I went to YouTube and typed in “Mayakeys,” but nothing came up. I was sure that I’d remembered it correctly, but maybe my spelling was off. Tentatively, I typed in “Mayakeyes” and waited.

Four videos came up. Two just had the words “Maya Keyes,” which told me virtually nothing. The other two looked to be homemade videos. One, I think, was in someone’s basement somewhere, while the other one looked to be filmed outside.

I clicked on the basement one and sound exploded out of the computer speakers. Loud, screeching sounds that could only be described as music by someone who had never heard any music before. I remembered punk music from

when I was a kid, but this was beyond even that. Maya—I think it was Maya—was screaming and yelling and chanting and I couldn't make out any words she said. It didn't even sound like English. I heard words like "Ktooloo" and "Daygon," but I couldn't say that they were even words. Maya, for her part, just jumped around the basement, screeching and gyrating as if she was having a seizure. I wondered if Fleet Human Resources knew about this. Maya was the only one in the video, and I couldn't tell if she was the one who filmed it as well.

The outside video looked as though it had been shot in a forest somewhere. There was a fire that Maya was dancing around, and it seemed as if it was shot through one of those night goggles, because everything was in green like on those fake "ghost-hunting" shows. The song started a little slower. I could hear an electric guitar, and then some synthesized drums came in. It was a strong, driving beat that gained in intensity as the song went on. I still couldn't tell a lot of what she was singing, but at least she wasn't screaming. I thought it was a love song, but then the beat got harder and more insistent and her voice got harsher and raspier. When she got to the chorus, she began singing about having sex with something called "my Deep One," which I couldn't figure out. Then she started thrashing back and forth, growling and howling and even, I thought, foaming at the mouth. I shut the computer off.

When Ann got home, I sat and listened to her tell me all about her day at the middle school where she taught and the church meeting. I had learned long ago how to listen to just enough to get by in case she quizzed me later. It was an endless litany of people I'd never meet and would never care about. When she asked how my day was, I just said it was a usual day. She looked at me, shrugged, and went back to her book.

That night, I had unusual dreams. I don't tend to dream too much and, when I do, they're not very remarkable. In this dream, I was wandering through a forest and it was dark. Somewhere there was something waiting for me and I was afraid that I was going to be late. Rushing forward, I came to a clearing where Maya stood, naked. I came to her and held her, but there was something off. She was not the one who was waiting. There was something else... something beyond the trees that was waiting for me. I felt, rather than heard, it coming closer, closer and then, suddenly, it was gone. I couldn't catch it, whatever it was, and it had gotten away from me. I felt a sense of loss and failure such as I had never felt before. In the dream, I sat down in the clearing and cried, alone.

For the first time in years, I did not greet the morning with anger.

My regular routine was no different. I rode the same bus into work and tried to concentrate on my mental game with myself, but some idiot two seats back

wouldn't stop talking. Apparently someone had gone crazy in Newport last night and wiped out his family with a knife. Others joined in talking about how there'd been a lot of sirens in the East Bay last night, and one woman whose brother worked at the emergency room at Rhode Island Hospital said that they'd had a rash of crazy, violent patients last night. I sat and tried to follow the progress of the bus in my mind. None of that had anything to do with me.

The morning passed quietly. Flexman spent most of his time on the local news websites and kept trying to get me interested in what he was reading. I just let him talk and, eventually, he quieted down. I kept my eyes open, but Maya never entered the room.

At lunchtime, I took my lunch and, not knowing why I did it, sat in a new seat, near the windows. It felt uncomfortable, being in the light and in the center of people. I could sense that they felt it too, as if I had intruded on their territory. Lunch today was a ham sandwich on rye, dry. I was just about to bite into it when Maya plopped down next to me, chicken parm sitting on her plate.

"Whew!" she said. "Didn't think I'd find you, Doug. What are you doing sitting over here?"

"Just thought it'd be a change."

She playfully frowned on me. "Change? You? Please! I bet you haven't even bought new clothes in years."

It was true. I hadn't.

"I... I, uh, watched your YouTube videos."

Her eyes widened and she smiled. At that instant, knowing that I had caused that smile was the greatest feeling in the world to me.

"You did? No fucking way! What did you think?"

"They're... they're different. You have a very distinctive style."

"You really think so? I can't tell you what that means to hear you say that!"

And she leaned forward and hugged me. Her breasts pushed into my arm and I felt a pleasant warmth growing within me.

Some of the people around us took notice.

"I didn't really understand some of the words, though."

"Really? That's OK. The more you listen to them, the clearer they get."

My mind raced for something to say to keep the conversation going. "Where do you get your inspiration from?"

She laughed.

"Lovecraft, of course."

I looked at her. I had no idea what she was talking about.

My confusion must have been written on my face because she answered before I even had to ask the obvious question.

“You know! Dude who lived in Providence in the 1930s? Wrote all those horror stories?”

“I... I don’t know who you mean. I don’t read much fiction.”

“Are you fucking serious? How long you live in Rhode Island?”

I broke eye contact and looked back at my sandwich. “All my life, pretty much.”

“And you don’t fucking know Lovecraft? Maybe I was wrong about you, Doug.”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought you understood. I thought you knew how the world was. I thought you and me connected.”

I was stunned and my mouth hung open.

“Maya, I just met you yesterday! How could you know me?”

She looked at me, hard. Then she laughed. “I was only fucking with you, Doug! I know you, all right. Here.”

She reached into her bag and pulled out a paperback. It was tattered and showed signs of having been read many times. The title read *The Best of H. P. Lovecraft: Bloodcurdling Tales of Horror and the Macabre*, and the cover was a colorless gray thing of what looked like different scenes in a kind of montage.

“Read this. You’ll be amazed, trust me.”

I had a flashback to movies about hippies trying to get the straight kids to try drugs, telling them that “it’ll blow your *mind*, man!”

Maya took out a pen. “I’ll underline some of the stories you should read first. These are the *best* ones.” She spent a few seconds writing in the book and then handed it to me.

I muttered a “thanks” and went back to my lunch.

“Don’t disappoint me, Doug! I know that you’ll love this stuff.”

“I won’t! I promise!” And suddenly it occurred to me that it had become very important to me that I not disappoint Maya.

She went back to her lunch, which had an extraordinary amount of cheese on it.

“There’s a lotta stuff out there, Doug. You shouldn’t close yourself off to it.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, different experiences, different feelings. You need to open yourself up to them. Allow yourself to let them come through you. What are your plans for this weekend?”

“Um, no real plans. I have some yard work to do. There’s always something to fix around the house.”

Maya shook her head.

“Come over to my place. You’ll have more fun than mowing the fucking lawn.”

I held up my left hand.

“Maya, I’m married. See?” I wiggled the ring on my finger.

She gave me a “yeah, right” look.

“No, you’re not, Doug. You know you’re not.”

She stood up and grabbed the book back. She quickly wrote something else in it. “Here’s my number. I’ll be waiting for your call.”

Maya leaned close and whispered in my ear. “I can show you things you always wanted to see, Doug, what the world really means and how it tastes.” She licked my ear, and I could feel that her tongue was pierced too.

As Maya walked out of the cafeteria, I could feel many pairs of eyes watching me, but I didn’t care. I was watching her ass and wanted desperately to touch it.

BACK AT MY DESK, I DID SOMETHING I NEVER THOUGHT I would do: I refitted my computer so that I could surf the Internet without the tracking programs seeing. I set off to learn as much about H. P. Lovecraft as I could and, by the end of the day, I had learned quite a bit.

To my surprise, there were actually quite a few websites devoted to Lovecraft. From them, I got an education on the man who was born in Providence in 1890 and would die there in 1937. I read about his unusual childhood, his relationship with his mother, and his writing career. His work was revolutionary, transforming not only horror but science fiction. Some critics considered him the twentieth-century version of Poe, and he had lived most of his life in my home state and I never knew.

I felt a poke from behind.

“Yo, Doug, what you doing?” Flexman asked.

“Just a little extra reading. You know how it is.”

Flexman laughed. “All right, my man! Didn’t know you had it in ya!”

I gave him a thumbs-up and went back to reading.

The more I read, the more I felt closer to Lovecraft. He didn’t have a lot of happiness or success in his life and felt that he was separated from humanity. It came across in his philosophy. He felt that mankind and all its worries and concerns were meaningless.

Once in college, when I'd studied philosophy and literature before I met Ann and it was decided I'd become an accountant, I was in an ethics class and the professor asked everyone to think about what their personal philosophy was and how it impacted your life. After much thought, I decided that I had no personal philosophy. I'd never been religious, never been in the military. If anything, I was an existentialist. I didn't care about anything. Nothing was important, least of all, me.

That night, I read several of the shorter stories. Ann was surprised to see me reading but didn't say anything about it. While imaginative, I couldn't really understand the point of some of the stories and they didn't seem to line up with what I had read online about Lovecraft's philosophy. I'd never really been one for fiction. No imagination, I suppose.

I put the book down and went to sleep.

That night, I had the dream again but it felt different. I was back in the clearing and naked Maya was holding my hand, pointing toward something further away in the trees. Whatever it was, it was waiting for me and it was important that I find it.

I tried to move, but my legs were heavy and weak. I was tied to the earth, which clutched at me and tried to pull me down. I screamed to Maya to help, but she turned and walked away. On her naked back, I could see a large tattoo. I couldn't tell what it was, but it was greenish and was a humanoid figure with tentacles on its face and wings on its back. As she walked, I could swear that the wings moved.

The ground swallowed me whole and I screamed.

THE NEXT MORNING, ANN "REMINDED" ME THAT SHE was going to the yearly meeting of her church group. I'd forgotten. If, that is, she had even told me to begin with. Every year, her church group got together with the other church groups in the state and had meetings and elections and such. I remember taking Ann to one a long time ago and being bored while I waited for her to get out. Since then, she'd arrange her own transportation and would usually stay over at whatever hotel was hosting the thing. If the timing of the meeting was strangely coincidental, I didn't notice it.

Less than an hour after she left, I was holding Maya's paperback in my hand, staring at the page with her phone number on it. Many years had passed since a girl had given me her phone number. I just had to find the courage to call. In the end, I compromised. Instead of calling, I sent her a text. Not even a minute later, I

got her response: “Come over. I’m waiting.” The second text was her address on Barnes Street on the East Side of Providence.

The place was easy to find. It was an older building, probably built around the turn of the century or so. I had no idea what architectural style it was, but it looked primarily Victorian. I only knew that it was old. It was a three-story tenement and had been split into two sides. The first-floor apartments had three panel windows—the kind that bulged out and you could make a nice window seat there. Maya’s apartment was on the left side, third floor. I pressed the button and she came running down.

“Doug!” she squealed. “You came! Wasn’t sure you would.”

I looked at her. Maya’s body was tight and young. She was wearing a kind of tank top that pressed her breasts up and together. She had tattoos on her arms. She had on a pair of the shortest shorts I think I’ve ever seen, and her legs were long and toned. She hugged me and, before I knew what was happening, kissed me on the lips, hard. Her tongue darted into my mouth and I could feel it seeking me. I moved my tongue and touched hers and felt myself getting hard.

“C’mon inside!” she said and took my hand.

We climbed the stairs and she led me into her apartment. It was a small place. One bedroom with a living room that connected to an open kitchen with a small table. A bathroom was between the bedroom and living room. The entire place was filled with stuff. There were books everywhere. A huge bookshelf was packed with DVDs and CDs. There were some movie posters on the wall, but I didn’t recognize any of the movies. They had titles like *Re-Animator* and *The Dunwich Horror* and weren’t in English. There was a small synthesizer keyboard in the corner, and various other musical equipment was scattered about. A sofa was against one wall and it looked as if it had seen better days. A large TV was facing the sofa and it was playing something I’d never seen before.

“So whattaya think?”

“It’s very nice. Cozy.” I replied.

She laughed. “No, it’s not. It’s a fucking closet, but that’s not why I took the place.”

When I didn’t respond, she replied, “The address? Hello? Lovecraft lived here!”

I looked around again. “He did?”

Maya scoffed. “Not in this apartment! He had the big one downstairs with his aunt. This was where he lived when he left his wife in New York and came back to Providence. Some of his best work was written here... can’t you feel it?”

All I felt was uncomfortable. Maybe I had made a mistake. I wasn't really sure why I had come here anyway and it seemed more uncertain with each minute.

"You, uh, you really seem to be into Lovecraft."

"Are you fucking kidding me? I live for it! Look at this!" She pointed to a tattoo on her right arm. I bent closer to get a better look. It was a black-and-white portrait of Lovecraft tattooed on her arm with various Gothic beasts around him. It was impressive.

She sat down on the couch and patted the seat next to her. I sat down next to her and could smell her body. It wasn't sweet and full of perfume. It was earthy and strong. "What are you watching?" I asked.

"It's *Dagon*," she replied. "One of Stuart Gordon's Lovecraft films. This one's pretty good even if it has more to do with 'Shadows over Innsmouth' than fucking 'Dagon.'"

I looked at the screen. A woman was being suspended in chains over some sort of pit. She was naked and covered in what looked like oil. Someone, the "hero," I guess, was trying to save her. He didn't do a very good job.

"This is what Lovecraft is all about," Maya said. "There's all these gods that live outside our world that used to rule here and want to do so again. They're fighting to break through and come back. It's a constant fight to keep them out."

"Really?" That wasn't what I had gotten out of my reading. "You're sure that's what Lovecraft meant?"

"Lovecraft's about the *outside* trying to get in."

Maya moved next to me, and I felt her weight pressing on my arm. She began to rub my chest and open the buttons on my shirt. Her hand moved inside and moved in circles as her fingers lightly touched my nipple. I looked at her and saw the most intense look on her face. The kind of look, I imagine, that a wild animal has as it starts to devour its prey. She started to lick my neck.

"I... I don't think this is a good idea. Maybe I should go."

I made to get up and she pushed me back down.

"You don't want to go, Doug," she said into my ear. "You want to stay right here. You *need* to stay right here."

She unbuckled my belt and zipped the fly down. Maya reached inside and grabbed me and rubbed her hand up and down. I couldn't resist any longer and grabbed her face and kissed her. This time, my tongue was the one searching for hers. I reached down and grabbed her breast and squeezed. Her nipple grew hard and I could tell that it was also pierced. Maya broke away and quickly took her shirt off and threw it away. She was beautiful. Her breasts were large and firm.

The nipples were hard and erect and her areolae were large and swollen. With a quick motion, she ripped my pants off and moved between my legs.

My eyes were closed as she took me in her mouth and sucked. I ran my fingers through her hair, bringing her head up and down. The piercing in her tongue flicked over the tip of my penis. Before I finished, I looked down at her. On her back there was the same tattoo from my dream” the green monster with an octopus face and wings. As she moved back and forth, I could swear that the wings were flying.

LATER, LYING ON THE COUCH (WE HAD NOT EVEN made it to the bed), I felt her ass and traced little circles on it. We’d been talking about Lovecraft, of course, and I’d been saying how I understood his philosophy. Maya, for the most part, wasn’t getting what I was trying to say.

“You don’t really believe that, do you?”

“Yes,” I said, “I do. Nothing really matters. We’re all insignificant.”

“No, you don’t believe that.”

“Why do you say that?”

She leaned up on one arm and looked at me. Her face was beautifully intense.

“Because if you did, then nothing would matter to you. No rules, no laws, no morality. You’d do whatever you fucking wanted because none of it makes a difference. Good, bad, indifferent. They’d all be the same.”

“I do what I want.”

Maya laughed. “Bull-fucking-shit! You don’t do *anything* you want! You work a job you hate. You’re stuck with a woman you don’t love. You follow every fucking rule and regulation you have thrown at you.”

I was getting mad. “I came here, didn’t I?”

She smiled. “Yeah, you did. But who fucked who, Doug?” Her lips curled into a smirk.

“You wanna show me you really don’t give a fuck about anyone or anything, Doug?” She reached over to a table next to the couch and felt around for something. “Take one of these.”

Maya held out her hand and, lying on her palm, were two black pills. I’d never seen anything so black. Each one had a large “N” on it in white.

“What are they?”

She waved her finger at me. “Uh-uh. No questions. Just take it.”

“I’m on medications. I can’t just take anything...”

Maya jumped off the couch. “Fuck it. I knew you weren’t the right one.”

I grabbed her arm and pulled her towards me.

“Give it to me.” I said. She put the pill between her teeth and leaned toward me. Our lips met and she pushed the pill into my mouth. I cold-swallowed it. She popped the other pill into her mouth and swallowed. I grabbed her ass and pushed her down on me. “Now we’ll see,” I whispered in her ear, “who’s doing the fucking.”

TIME CEASED TO HAVE ANY MEANING. IT WAS JUST A concept. A concept that I, in my ultimate power, was rejecting. I’d never taken drugs before in my life. I remembered all the things I’d read and heard about acid trips and highs, but this didn’t feel anything like that. It was like being in a dream but being fully awake.

I felt rather than saw Maya beside me. We were in the clearing but we were also in her apartment, limbs intertwined and thrusting. I was here but I was also there. My mind was split and I could move and function in both places at the same time. Off in the distance, something was coming for me.

In the here, I was looking in Maya’s face as her eyes rolled up inside her head.

In the there, she took my hand and beckoned me further to the other side of the clearing.

In the here, my hands were roughly rubbing her breasts as her veins became brighter and shone through her skin.

In the there, I stepped outside the opposite edge of the clearing and heard something coming closer.

In the here, Maya’s breath became short and ragged.

In the there, something moved toward me without moving.

In the here, she sang and chanted with the voice of something inhuman and *outside*.

In the there, something moved through the wood of the trees and shifted and ululated as it came forward like a mist.

In the here, I licked the sweat from between her breasts and tasted blood.

In the there, something crawled toward me and in its center was chaos.

In the here, Maya wept and laughed.

In the there, something opened my mind and stepped inside and I allowed it to.

In the here, my hands went to Maya’s back and I felt leathery wings.

In the there, the voice spoke to me and I finally understood what it meant.

In the here, I felt myself ripping Maya apart.

In the there, I knew my insignificance and saw its truth.

WHEN I AWOKE, MAYA WAS IN PIECES ON THE FLOOR. A blood-stained butcher knife was in my hand. I looked at her and felt only envy. I took a shower, got dressed, and left. If anyone had heard anything, I didn't notice it. In my pocket were about two dozen of the black pills.

Maya was right. I hadn't really understood. I had been foolish and innocent in my blindness. What I had thought was insignificance hadn't even begun to touch the truth. The chaos had shown me when it came into my mind. Nothing of man mattered. None of the history, none of the accomplishments, the wars, the heartbreak, none of it made any difference. The cosmos was awash with creatures whose footsteps eclipsed our civilizations in length and indifference. Laws, rules, and morality were mere trappings man clothed himself in while he desperately tried to convince himself that he mattered at all. Now I understood it all and what it truly meant to be insignificant. Nothing was important, which was liberating and damning all at the same time.

That's what Lovecraft had meant. The "gods" and "monsters" were just window dressing, something for the "earth-centric"-minded ones to latch on to. When you finally understood it all, you knew that there was no reason for anything. There were no "gods" waiting to reclaim the earth. There was only the universe, spiraling onward, unknowing, uncaring, indifferent to man who puffed up his chest like a little puppy barking at a garbage truck.

When I got home, I moved a chair to face the front door. I got a large knife from the kitchen and sat down to wait for Ann. Time no longer had any hold on me. I sat in the chair, swallowed black pills, and waited. When I was finished with Ann, I'd get on the bus and go to work and show them how insignificant they were. I'd show everyone how insignificant they all were and make them look into my face and see and know that they had never been important, they had never mattered. None of it ever had.

Thistle's Find

SIMON STRANTZAS

Simon Strantzas is the critically acclaimed author of Nightingale Songs, Cold to the Touch, and Beneath the Surface—three collections of the strange and supernatural published by Dark Regions Press. His British Fantasy Award–nominated fiction has appeared a number of times in the Mammoth Book of Best New Horror series, as well as in venues such as Postscripts and Cemetery Dance. His story collection Burnt Black Suns was published in 2014. He can be found haunting the streets of Toronto, Canada, where he continues to live with his ever-patient wife and an unyielding hunger for the flesh of the living.

I'D CALLED DR THISTLE BECAUSE I WAS TIGHT ON cash and because the place I'd been staying had just been flipped by the police again. It was getting old, to be honest, but I was used to it. The police and I didn't get along—not after what happened when Mrs. Mulroney died, at any rate—so I did my best to avoid them. They were bad for business, and it didn't help that Detective McCray still had his crooked eye on me, along with the rest of his moustache gang.

But I thought I could trust Dr. Thistle to help, or at least hide me out for a while. I'd known him for nearly my entire life—ever since I was a weird little kid and he was my weirder neighbor. My parents had warned me to keep away from him, but even then I knew they were full of shit and didn't know what they were talking about. Dr. Thistle treated me like an adult, which is all any kid really wants.

He wasn't a regular doctor. I'm not even sure he ever went to medical school. When he first told me to call him "Doctor" I did and never questioned it. He had all the credentials: his house was full of all that equipment only a doctor could afford. It all seemed legit to me and I'd seen enough doctors on TV to know what I was talking about.

I eventually figured out he didn't treat people and that he was a bit of a quack, but that only made him *more* interesting. His thoughts were crazy, and the mumbo-jumbo he talked about when I first met him only made marginally more sense once I was a teenager and had some school behind me. Some of the words he used went right over my head—so far over, I think a plane might have hit them. Eventually, I got bored of going over there all the time to deal with his insanity, but I kept it up because my asshole of a father forbade it, and because I'd read a book once where a crazy old man gave a fortune to the one kid dumb enough to stick around and talk to him. It was a gamble, sure, but no one else ever visited and those machines couldn't have been cheap to buy.

When the bus let me off at Thistle's I barely even looked at the house I grew up in. My parents still lived there as far as I knew, but if they did I knew they'd never let me back in. They believed everything Detective McCray told them about me, and that was that. There was nothing more to do. If they saw me get off the bus in front of Thistle's house they didn't

open the door or come to the window. I was like a ghost to my own flesh and blood, which was kind of ironic when you think about it.

Thistle's house had an aura around it. The feeling was palpable as I stood there, staring at the two levels of dilapidation, my skin slick and clammy. The air smelled of ozone, as though reality had been bent, something I was far more familiar with than I would have liked, thanks to Mrs. Mulroney. Still, it left me feeling nauseated.

Whatever Thistle was up to inside, it was clearly a bad idea. My gut knew it, even if my head thought different. Still, I couldn't help but be curious, so instead of running I climbed the uneven concrete steps to the porch and swung the front door's tarnished brass knocker. Flakes of paint fluttered like dead leaves to the ground.

The old man that answered the door must have been Thistle, but it was hard to tell under all those gray wrinkles. He was dressed only in an old undershirt and boxer shorts, and both were stained so severely I wondered if they'd ever been washed. He was sweating and out of breath, and the putrid smell that hit me took me off guard. It burned my eyes.

"Owen! It's good to see you. Your timing is *perfect*. Now, inside. Quickly!"

I kicked the dirt off my feet even though they were probably cleaner than his carpet. Doctor Thistle was, quite simply, a hoarder, and over the years since I'd been in his house it had only grown worse. When I was a kid, visiting was like going on a treasure hunt, and I think all the things I discovered there beneath the piles and stacks taught me that there was always something interesting to find if I just looked hard enough. It also taught me that other people's stuff was unimportant next to finding those things. Thistle complained, but he never kicked me out for tearing his stacks apart, which is another reason I stuck by him for so long.

He led me down a narrow path between stacks of old science journals and newspapers. The further into the house we got, the sicker I felt.

"I need some help, Doc. I'm a bit light on cash and—"

"It doesn't matter," he said, waving my predicament away. "I need to show you something. I don't want to spoil the surprise for you, so just follow me; I haven't written everything down yet and I don't want to get confused."

I don't know how old he was when I first met him, but after so many years Dr. Thistle had to have been ancient. You could see it in the cataracts of his jaundiced eyes. The smell in the house hadn't eased, but I'd acclimated myself to it somewhat and was able to stop cupping my mouth in my hand. I wondered what Thistle had been cooking and whether I could pry one of the painted-over windows open enough for some fresh air. It was like breathing in a room full of rotten meat. The flies were legion.

Thistle's old heavy feet clomped on the bare wooden staircase into the basement. I'd never been allowed down there before, and as we descended I felt the old tingle of childhood fear creeping up on me. I hadn't been afraid of anything in so long that part of me was amused by the sensation, but there was another part that wondered why it had occurred at all, especially considering all the horrible things I'd witnessed since. I suppose we're all just an amalgamation of our childhood fears and instincts; no matter what our brains know, sometimes old fear runs much deeper than logic can dam.

And for that fear, I can only blame my parents.

My mother had told me there were rumors about Dr. Thistle, and I knew Dad and she were angry about him moving in, but it didn't make sense. He may have been strange, but he'd been nothing but nice to me. I can probably guess, in hindsight, what stories my mother had heard, but nothing unsavoury ever happened. I'm pretty sure I would remember something like that. Well, reasonably sure.

The basement lights were off, but sunlight edged around the material papering the windows. I heard the hum of the machinery running, as well a whining noise and something shuffling. The rotten tobacco odor from upstairs had given way to the tremendous stench of old musky sweat, and no matter how deep I breathed it wasn't deep enough to get acclimated. The world wavered in the periphery of my vision, and what I *could* see amounted only to the red and blue indicator lights of a room full of electronic gear. I heard something there in the dark, like breathless panting and slobbering, and a low growl that sounded as if it was almost on top of me and not very happy.

"When did you buy a dog, Doc?"

"A dog?" His voice seemed warped there in the dark. "I don't have a dog. What you're hearing, that's—well, that's something else entirely. I'll show

you, but you need to see something else first. Just stand right where you are. I don't want you knocking anything over."

I heard Thistle's footsteps move away from me, and I thought I could make him out faintly in the corner of my eye, rippling the dark as he passed. The smell off him faded a bit, but I still felt nauseous. And curious. I definitely felt curious.

The lights blinded me when they came on. I don't know if they were too bright, or I just wasn't ready, but the pain in my head was as sharp and swift as a razor and I was already screaming before my eyelids shut. It drove whatever animal Thistle had down there crazy. It started howling and thrashing while Thistle's shushes seemed aimed at us both. When I finally managed to pry my eyes open again I immediately wanted to shut them. Impossibly, the basement was more cluttered than the floor above. I don't think there were as many boxes and piles, but what was there was larger and odder shaped. It just seemed *full* of equipment. Blue network cables were wrapped around and hanging from joists crisscrossing the room, sometimes dangling so low they looked as if they'd clothesline any average-sized man walking past. Machinery and computers were running everywhere, displays spitting out screen after screen of meaningless code. In the middle of it all was what looked like a mirror. About two feet square, its surface was less reflective and more as if it had the *appearance* of reflection. That's the best way I can put it. Whatever I could see in its surface was blurry and didn't look quite right. The thin metal square was held up by a two-post rack, and I wondered if every goddamn cable in the place attached to it in some way.

"What're you building down here, Doc?"

"Oh, it's built, it's built." Thistle laughed but the sound of it had a strange throaty warble, and the look on his face was hard to peg. "It's a door, Owen. I've built a door."

"What are you talking about?"

"Hang on. Don't touch anything."

He started hitting buttons and turning knobs and the machines in the room made the same noises they had before, but the pitch was higher. It was as if they were working together to produce the most ear-splitting whine possible. Immediately, my nausea tripled, and I experienced something similar to my worst flashbacks. I covered my ears, but Thistle didn't,

probably because he was already used to the experience. Or maybe he'd just found a node to stand in. He worked the controls as if he was a lot crazier than I'd ever given him credit for. He danced between the switches and keyboards with glassy-eyed glee, his tongue peeking from his mouth, periodically licking his bottom lip. I also heard the mournful cries of that animal, though it wasn't easy over the device's whine.

Thistle turned around—it was the first time he'd looked directly at me since switching on his equipment, and without missing an excited step started pointing at the middle of the room where the reflective metal square was standing. Beneath it, lights flickered with the same hyperactivity, but the mirror itself had changed forms. Earlier its reflection had been a poor reproduction of what was in front of it—colours muted, angles bent, images blurred and unknowable—but the surface had started to glow and ripple, and whatever had been reflected there wasn't anymore. Just what images *were* reflected was baffling, but the sight was enough to make what little I'd eaten for breakfast come rushing up my throat. I bent over and vomited, and it spread across the floor like thick soup.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. "Are you all right, Owen?" I stood up and nodded, looking at Thistle through my watering eyes. I wiped off my mouth.

"The noise is really messing with my head."

He nodded. "It takes some getting used to. Don't worry, it'll wear off in a minute. And don't worry about the floor. It'll be fine once it dries. Come look at this."

He led me to the mirror, and though I felt the pressure in my head worsen, my stomach settled down. Thistle's odor didn't help matters. I wondered what I was doing in that basement, and what the hell Thistle was up to. Mostly, though, I wanted to leave and get myself to a bar. If there was one thing I'd learned about throwing up, it was that it always tasted a lot better followed by a shot of gin. And maybe one before, as well.

"Look, but don't touch," Thistle said, and I peeked into the mirror with suspicion. I didn't see my reflection. What I saw I don't think I can properly describe. It was like a window hanging over the middle of the floor, and what was on the other side of it was a vast landscape of rock and scrub brush. I peered closer as Thistle watched me, a playful smile on his face while mine was no doubt clouded with confusion.

"What is this?"

“It’s a world, Owen. A world almost nothing like ours. I discovered it many years ago, but over time the barrier between there and here has grown thin. So thin, in fact, I was able to fashion a quantum hole using harmonic glass and—”

“But... how?”

Thistle looked at me over the top of his glasses.

“I *am* a doctor, you know.”

Suddenly, I saw the truth in his eyes.

“You think this is going to make you rich, don’t you?”

Thistle cleared his throat. “Well, the thought did cross my mind, but no, not yet. I haven’t been able to tune it. Right now, this is the only world I can see, and it’s not the kind of place anyone wants to visit.”

“What do you mean, *visit*?”

“Yes, Owen. This isn’t a window. It’s a door.”

When a man as old and as obviously crazy as Dr. Thistle smiles, when you get a good look at those crooked yellow teeth and the white film on his bleeding gums, it’s nothing short of disturbing. Especially when that man is talking to you in his underwear. Compared to that, a portal into another world barely registered. I’d seen weird things before, as the late Mrs. Mulroney can attest, and eventually they stopped being anything more than curious. But old people’s smiles... those things ate at my soul.

“Have you gone through it yet?” I took a step closer to get a better look. Thistle stopped me with an arm across my chest.

“You don’t want to get too close, Owen. But this brings me to what I wanted to show you.”

“It wasn’t this?” I was confused, and more than a bit irritated he wouldn’t let me get closer to his dimensional window.

“I only showed you this so you’d better understand what I have locked up in the other room. It’s no dog.”

“What is it?”

“One of them.”

“One of who?”

Again, he smiled that creepy smile, this time punctuated with a slide of his tongue across his lower lip. I don’t think he knew he was drooling.

“One of *them*.”

Now things were getting interesting.

After he led me through the maze of wires and equipment that filled the basement, Thistle stopped me at the door to the rear storage room. It had a large padlock around the handle to keep it shut. From other side of the door I could hear that growling, slobbering noise again. I didn't know what it was, but it was clearly inhuman.

"If you were anyone else, I wouldn't show you this, but I have a feeling that you won't judge me too harshly. I wouldn't be surprised if this didn't shock you at all."

He was wrong, though. What I saw inside that storage room was indeed shocking. Beneath the deadening fluorescent lights was an old wooden table. Short thick ropes were tied around each of the legs, and they led up to secure Thistle's trophy to the tabletop. I recognized it at once, and I felt a rush of revulsion and excitement that were so close together I couldn't tell where one ended and the other began. The creature he stole from that other world looked to me like no creature at all, but instead like a teenage girl, no more than fifteen. She was tied down spread-eagle. And she was naked.

"Beautiful, isn't it? She looks almost human."

"Where did you find her?" I asked. The primal side of me was reacting to her nakedness in a way I was trying desperately to stop. Her violent gyrations on the table didn't exactly help. I was really very worried about the situation I was in, especially if cock-eyed Detective McCray found me. If Thistle had picked this girl up off the street—even during some hallucinogenic episode—then I was in the kind of trouble I wouldn't be able to slide out from under. "Where did you get her, Doc? I need to know."

"I told you, Owen. I got her from over there. And I know what you're thinking, but don't be fooled. She's not some little girl I snatched up off the street. She's a ghoul."

"A what?"

"See for yourself."

I walked slowly to the girl, forcing my eyes away from her tiny breasts and the allure of her bare mons. I kept my eyes on hers, looking for any sign of humanity in them, but there was nothing there. Only animal ferocity. She was a feral beast, and when she looked at me and roared I could see her teeth were ragged and sharp. And there were far too many of them. I hadn't seen a ghoul before that point, and she was nothing like those I saw later, so I don't know if I can call her that now in hindsight, but I know from

experience that every plane has its own reality, and I suppose she was just as likely to be a ghoul as not.

“She doesn’t seem to have any idea of where she is.”

“No, I doubt she does. She’s no more than an animal. As far as I can tell her reality doesn’t have any sort of civilization, merely hunting packs.”

I stepped back, afraid of the stress I saw her putting on the ropes. She looked far stronger than I expected. “Why did you bring her over? You know you’d never be able to sell her.”

“Well, maybe not for any scientific reason, but...” He trailed off into that smile again, waiting for me to understand what he was saying. I thought I did, but I didn’t believe I was right, not until I noticed the erection in his pants.

“You mean—?”

He nodded slowly but with pride. As though she understood what we were talking about, she began violently pulling at the ropes, bucking and thrusting her groin into the air in an effort to break free. She did not seem pleased with her situation. I was at a loss for what to say. I wondered how many men might pay for the experience of fucking an animal shaped like a teenage girl. Then when I realised the answer I wondered just how *much* they would pay. I looked back at the creature, and she was staring straight at Thistle and growling at a quiet, subhuman decibel.

“You haven’t—Have you—?”

“I had to test it out, Owen. I had to make sure that... that all the parts worked. Then I had to make doubly sure.”

I nodded, wondering how I managed to get myself into another mess.

“So why show me?”

“I know you, Owen. You’ve got connections all over the place, and from what I gather they aren’t the kind who’d be shocked by something not quite of this world. There’s money to be made here, and I want you to be my partner. No more sleeping on the street or rundown flops or begging for money for you. It’s really the kind of experience you don’t forget, believe me. It’s addictive. I feel years younger, and I think maybe I look it, too. I haven’t taken my medication in weeks. I don’t need to, not with this thing around. It reinvigorates me!” He spit at it and it hissed and strained at its ropes, rubbing its arms raw. “Go ahead,” he said, at last getting to his point. “Try it out.”

Sometimes I get put in strange situations. I'm not going to tell you I'm a saint by any stretch of the imagination, but neither am I as bad as people say I am. People like crooked-eye McCray, for one. That sort of thing, it's good for the reputation, and having a reputation tends to open more doors than it closes, but sometimes you're expected to do things you wouldn't normally do, and the question is always whether you do them and deal with the consequences, or don't do them and allow a chink in that precious image you've worked so long on building to protect you. It's amazing how quickly one can be destroyed.

Whether it was the obviously aroused Thistle or the naked girl writhing in front of me, I wasn't sure, but I became acutely aware that the storage room smelled of stale sex. Thistle was chuckling and was rubbing himself over his stained boxers at the mere thought of watching me fuck the bound creature. The last thing I needed was his perverted eyes on me while he masturbated.

"I'd rather do this on my own."

In an instant, his face broke. It was obvious he didn't want to leave. "But it's not safe. What if she gets loose?"

"Something tells me that if you've gone at her alone that you've made sure she's tied up good and tight. I'll take my chances. Better the devil I can see."

His disappointment turned to irritation that bordered on anger, but I reminded him of the help he was going to need to get his project off the ground.

"All right, I'll give you a few minutes. I need to check on the window anyway."

He closed the door on me and I locked it, then I turned around and faced the thing on the table. She panted heavily, her mouth opening and closing as if she was warming up her muscles. I wanted nothing to do with her, but the scent of her sex and soft flesh was making my head swim. I wanted to look away, but despite my bravado in front of Thistle I was afraid that she'd somehow break free when I wasn't paying attention.

"You're a good girl, right? You aren't going to hurt me?"

She snarled and I shuddered.

I knew I had only a few minutes before Thistle's fantasies got the better of him and he tried to sneak in to catch me literally with my pants down. I

wasn't going to give him the opportunity. He didn't leave me with much in the storage room, strangely the one place in the house not cluttered to the ceiling. I guess he wanted some room to show his ghoul who was boss. As far as I saw it, despite his grandiose ideas Thistle was not one to share, and his hunger was always going to be bigger than he could fill. I pulled out the folding knife I kept in my pocket and started to fray the ropes around the girl's wrists and ankles. I was careful not to cut *too* much—I didn't want her escaping before I set things in motion. She almost seemed to understand what I was doing, because she struggled less as I worked, but when I looked into her eyes I saw they were as empty as a shark's. There was nothing behind them that approached a soul. Only further blackness.

On cue the door shot open revealing Thistle, his boxer shorts now gone, his pencil at full attention. "What the hell are you—" was all he managed to get out before my knife cut through the last of the ghoul's bonds and her inhuman strength did the rest. She leapt across the room at such speed Thistle didn't have a chance to move his hands from his hard-on before she tore off his face with razor-sharp teeth. Still, he tried to speak, his voice a gurgling brook as she crouched over him; then those same teeth removed a large piece of his throat and finally shut him up. She began to lap up the blood as quickly as it spurted while his body shook and convulsed, his hand still clenched around his member so tightly it had turned deep blue. I chose this moment, I think wisely, to dash out of the room while the girl was still distracted by her meal. I thought I felt her hands claw at my ankle as I passed and I shrieked, but didn't stop until I was outside the storage room and was able to shut the door and padlock it. At that point I checked my leg for damage and was relieved to find none.

I slumped to the floor, my heart racing, astounded I'd made it out alive. I don't know if it was the fear or the sight of that bloodied naked girl, but I found myself somewhat aroused by the whole ordeal. That sensation withered once I felt the pounding on the door I was leaning against.

It was like a sledgehammer coming down hard, again and again, from the other side, and judging by the way the wooden frame was splintering it was clear the room wouldn't hold Thistle's ghoul for long. I scrambled to my feet and looked around the stacks of debris from the dead man's life. The only thing in my favor once the girl broke free was that the basement's maze of junk and wires would prevent her from springing on me, but the

obstacles were just as confining for me as they were for her, if not more so. There was no way I could outrun her but, maybe, there was a way to escape her. Thistle had left his dimensional machinery on and running, and the window was still operational. I picked up a book from one of the piles and threw it at the window; it passed through with a flash of static. I looked back at the door to see a thin bloody arm break through and begin to tear the wood apart. She made a hole easily big enough to fit her tiny body and leapt through to land on all fours about fifteen feet in front of me. She snarled and lifted her nose to the air.

“Easy, kitty.”

She had my scent, and in my terror I wondered how she could smell anything with her face covered in blood. It ran through those rows of sharp teeth and then down her neck until it dripped off her tiny breasts. She raised her head skyward and made some horrible screech, and when she was done I heard its response from the electronic window humming behind me. I dared a quick peek and saw a row of shadows in the distance moving across the rocks. She was calling reinforcements, calling her pack, and I knew that if I didn’t do something quickly they were going to find their way through the portal. If that happened, a lot of bad news was going to follow, not the least of which being that I would be deadlier than Thistle. *Some gratitude*, I thought.

“Here, girl. Come here, girl.” I tried to whistle, but my mouth was too dry. She looked at me with those dead eyes and cocked her head. “Be a good girl and jump through the window.” I could hear the howling behind me and wondered how much time I had left before the pack arrived. A minute? Maybe two? I couldn’t turn around to see their approach while the girl in front of me stared and growled. I was running out of options. “Come on, girl,” I said, motioning her forward. I’d have shown her my throat as bait, but I didn’t want anything to happen to it. “Come here.” When she took a step forward, I almost wet myself.

I worked to keep the window between us while she took sideways steps, looking for an opening. The cables from the ceiling kept her grounded, but they also keep me from moving very far with any sort of protection. She was making a wet bray as she stalked toward me, and I knew I was running short of time—the howls of her pack were getting louder and louder—but I kept speaking quietly to her, kept tempting her forward. Each step she took

left a bloodied footprint behind, and as she knocked computer equipment aside I prayed she didn't do anything to damage it. When she was within six feet of me she stopped and went up onto her haunches. I could see that all the muscles in her body were so tightly tensed she was like a wound spring. She was getting ready to pounce, but all I could think about was how engorged her labia had become. I swallowed hard.

I moved more by terrified reflex than anything else when she leapt. As soon as those muscles started to unfurl, time for me slowed to a crawl. I immediately stumbled backward, flailing my hands out in front of me. I managed through sheer luck to push the two-post rack over onto her, and as it fell she managed to leap into the portal and disappear from this world and into the next. The window continued to fall toward the floor and I braced for its impact, but it never came. Instead, the electric window hung a foot from the ground, its intact wires and cables breaking its fall. Then I heard wild howling and knew the pack had arrived.

I reached up and started pulling any wire I could get my hands on, hoping to disconnect the window before those creatures leapt through. I could feel the cables giving handfuls at a time, but that sickening hum didn't stop. I saw an arm appear from under the hanging window, an arm far larger and thicker than the one I'd seen on Thistle's ghoul, and I knew I didn't have a choice. I leapt over the fallen debris onto the back of the fallen two-post rack, adding my weight to it. The cables holding it up snapped immediately, and it and I crashed into the ground. The window shattered and I was thrown forward, hitting my head on the edge of one of the tables, knocking computer equipment to the ground. Everything went black for me then.

When I awoke I knew two things: the first, that I was still alive; the second, that I wished I wasn't. My head throbbed and, when I put my hand on it, it came away covered in blood. I tried to stand, but the world was spinning way too fast and I had to sit again. At least until the room slowed down. I looked around me at the destruction. A thick beastly arm lay cleanly severed at my feet amid broken glass and plastic. There was blood everywhere, some of it mine, and footprints across the concrete leading back to a broken door and some massacre beyond it. I'd made a clusterfuck of things again, and I had no idea how I was going to explain it away. Normally, I'd just leave, but there was no way my fingerprints weren't all

over the place, no doubt full of blood. My only solace was the knowledge that no one would be missing Dr. Thistle, which bought me a little time.

I managed to crawl upstairs after a while and found a towel to hold against my bleeding head. The wound wasn't as deep as I thought, and the crazy glue I found in one of the millions of boxes was enough to keep the wound shut without me having to go to the hospital for stitches. I crawled into the bathtub and turned on the cold water, then sat there for as long as I could, trying not to pass out. I didn't think I had a concussion, but I wasn't going to take the chance. I wasn't crazy, despite what I kept telling myself.

I'd had to do a lot of things in my life, but getting rid of a body was never one of them. I had a vague idea of what to do, and thankfully Dr. Thistle had all the tools I needed somewhere in his piles of clutter, but sawing through bone is a lot harder than it sounds. When I managed to get him down into enough manageable pieces, I put them and the severed arm into a black garbage bag and carried it over to a place I knew behind Greenwood Racetrack. It was the place you took things you wanted to forget about. Everybody knew that. Once I got back I cleaned the house as best I could and made some space for myself. I'd finally found a home. At least, for a little while. Until they shut the power off, at any rate.

Further Beyond

BRIAN STABLEFORD

Brian Stableford's recent fiction includes the collection of Mythos stories The Womb of Time (Perilous Press, 2010), which includes "The Legacy of Erich Zann," the first item in a series of novellas and novels featuring Edgar Allan Poe's proto-detective C. August Dupin, all published by Borgo Press. The later items in the series include the Mythos novel The Cthulhu Encryption. He is also working on a series of translations of French scientific romances and supernatural fiction from the 19th and 20th centuries, published by Black Coat Press, recent inclusions in which are Louise Michel's The Human Microbes and Félicien Champsaur's Ouha, King of the Apes.

“That Crawford Tillinghast should ever have studied science and philosophy was a mistake. These things should be left to the frigid and impersonal investigator, for they offer two equally tragic alternatives to the man of feeling and action: despair, if he fail in his quest, and terrors unutterable and imaginable if he succeed.”

H. P. LOVECRAFT, “FROM BEYOND”

I HAD KNOWN, OF COURSE, THAT CRAWFORD Tillinghast had correspondents—one might almost say colleagues—with whom he discussed his work in progress, for science is not, like sorcery, the work of isolated and secretive individuals working from the pages of soiled grimoires. It is the work of men who know that they are engaged in a collective endeavor directed toward understanding, who know that clear and far sight is only available to those who stand on the shoulders of giants, willing to debate what they glimpse. Even so, I was surprised when they began to contact me, in the aftermath of Tillinghast's tragic demise, eager to know whether I had removed any notes, diagrams, or calculations from his house on the night of the disaster—or where such documents might be located if I had not—and eager, too, for a more complete account of my experience on that occasion than I had been prepared to give to the police.

His former correspondents were not the only ones who got in touch with me; nor was I the only one with whom they got in touch. When Tillinghast's widow, Rachel, wrote to me, asking whether I would grant her an interview, she mentioned that she had heard from three of the philosophical vultures circling the corpse of his ambition—although she did not, of course, express it in those terms. The image was mine, born not only from my unsympathetic attitude to Tillinghast's scientific endeavors, but also of the state of mind in which his fatal experiment had left me. I was always looking up, afraid of what I might see... and what I was afraid of seeing was cruel, sinister and raptorial.

I say "state of mind" because I was careful, then, not to say "state of being." I did not want to consider, let alone admit, that the experiment could have wrought a permanent change in me. I did not even want to imagine the possibility that the radiation of Tillinghast's machine, rather than administering a momentary and transient stimulation to the pineal body in my brain, had somehow triggered a slow but definitive alteration of its anatomy and its sensory capacity.

What I wanted to imagine was that what I had experienced on that fateful night was, in fact, no more than the immediate product of my own frightened imagination, suggestively stimulated by Tillinghast's fragile mental condition. What I wanted to imagine, in addition, was that Gregory,

and Tillinghast's other servants, had not been murdered at all, either by human hands or by some horrid creature from a world parallel to our own, hidden from our senses in some subtle realm of dark matter. I wanted to imagine, or at least to hope, that they were still alive and happy, if not in our world then in the other, perhaps having undergone some benign metamorphosis. If I were to entertain the notion of metamorphosis at all, I dearly wanted to think of such processes as benign. Tillinghast had, after all, been quite insistent in the course of his final mad tirade that his "pets" hadn't *hurt* his servants at all.

The "vultures" who took the trouble to press their suit with Rachel as well as with me were three in number. Their names were Patterway, Crisson, and Dove. Patterway was a professor of natural sciences at Miskatonic University. Crisson was, like Tillinghast, an amateur—the scion of a family enriched in the distant past by the slave trade and in the nearer past by shrewd capitalist dabbling—who had elected to devote himself to a passion for electrical science, probably moved by the inspiration of the Wizard of Menlo Park. Dove was... well, I have to confess that I never have found out exactly what Dove considers himself to be. I know that he will not accept the label "psychic researcher," or that of "parapsychologist," any more than he will condescend to describe himself as a "medium." I have always had the impression that he was a failed literary man before interesting himself in the mysteries of the plenum, as so many lifestyle fantasists are, but such evidence as he has provided has always been suggestive and indirect, and no one any longer expects clarity from him.

My immediate response to the inquiries of the vultures had been negative, not merely in the trivial sense of flatly denying that I had any of Tillinghast's papers in my possession but also in the more assertive sense of telling them that I had no wish to see any of them, or speak or write to them about what I had experienced, or anything else. I stopped short of telling them to go to hell in so many words, although I was tempted.

Rachel's appeal was, however, a different matter. She was Tillinghast's widow—Tillinghast's relict, as the jargon has it.

Tillinghast had been my closest friend for many years, and our friendship had deep roots; it could not have been sustained otherwise, given that we had drifted apart intellectually to such an extent as no longer to have anything much in common in our ideas and interests by the time he died.

We had known each other as boys, however, when we had been inseparable, and it had seemed both natural and inevitable to maintain our friendship at college in spite of the divergence of our academic interests. Even then, our fellow students thought Tillinghast eccentric and ill-tempered, and felt slightly uneasy in his company, but I knew him better than they did. Perhaps he was eccentric, and he did occasionally lack self-control, but he was also brilliant and steadfastly loyal. I knew that the trust he had in me was as indissoluble as his love for Rachel, even if it did not arise from the passionate element of his character—and he knew that he could always depend on me, even though others thought me cold and indifferent to everything.

When Tillinghast and Rachel had separated in the seventh year of their marriage, casual acquaintances suggested that it was because his love of science was greater than his love for her, and that she had been wounded by neglect as well as intimidated by occasional outbursts of wrath, but that was not so. It was simply that he found it far easier to express his love of science than his love for Rachel in the conventional ways expected—demanded—by New England society. It was not the depth of his passion that was at fault but its mask, and it was not neglect that wounded her but an intensity of feeling that seemed to her too awkwardly formed, even when it was expressed very differently than in wrath, to be easily bearable. They lived apart for more years than they had lived together, but neither ever sued for divorce or sought solace elsewhere.

I knew Rachel, of course, as my friend's wife, but we never had any relationship outside my friendship with him. It was through science that he met her—she was a laboratory technician at the college where he and I were students—and it always seemed to me that the bond between them was somehow located on the opposite side of his personality to the bond that linked him to me. Ours was a linear rather than a triangular community, and Tillinghast loomed so large between myself and Rachel that she often seemed invisible to me: a significant presence in my life as well as his, while they were together, but always in shadow. Even so, I could not hesitate over my response to an appeal from her. Whatever she wanted of me she had a right to ask, and I had a duty to provide.

I wrote to say that she was very welcome to visit me in the suburbs of Providence, or that I would be equally glad to visit her in the coastal village

where she had taken up residence, not far from New Bedford, but she replied that, as the sole heir to Tillinghast's estate, she would need to spend at least a week in the house of which she was now the owner, in order to take inventory of its contents and decide what was to be done with both the movable and immovable property. She asked me to come and see her there on the evening following her arrival, and to stay long enough to lend her what assistance I could in her sad task. I could not refuse, no matter how intimidated I was by the prospect.

Because time was short, I telephoned in order to agree to her proposal. "There's a small hotel where the by-road that leads to Tillinghast's house joins the highway," I told her. "It's only a mile away. I'll reserve a room there."

"Please don't, David," she said. "To be honest, I'd much rather have you stay in the house. I'll bring my chauffeur and my maid-of-all-work with me, so we won't have to fend for ourselves. Besides which, you might have difficulty booking a room. It's only a small hotel, and *they*'ll be there."

"Who?" I asked, a trifle stupidly.

"The unholy trinity: Patterway, Crisson, and Dove. They're all exceedingly keen to acquire the wreckage of Crawford's machine, and all his other equipment—not to mention his papers. Only Crisson has so far put in a cash bid, but Patterway is insistent that everything ought to go to Miskatonic, in order that it might be properly preserved and evaluated, and I suspect that I could stage an interesting auction—or perhaps start a war—if I assembled them all in the same room, with the wreckage of the machine and any papers I can find in the house. Before I let any of them in, though, I feel that I need some moral and intellectual support—support that only you, in all probability, could meaningfully provide. Will you be my knight in shining armor, to defend my confusion and poor Crawford's honor?"

What could I say? While feeling that things were going from bad to worse—that not only would I have to confront that damnable haunted house again, but that I would have to do so in the presence of avid carrion-birds—I could not possibly turn down an appeal so phrased. There is a code of behavior imposed on anyone summoned to play the knight, which forbids any refusal to enter the lists, even against dragons, giants and ogres. There is no specific mention of migraines in medieval romance, but plenty of

vaguer references to illness, and to visions of all sorts; knights are supposed to suffer such things bravely, and conquer them—or die trying.

“I shall be delighted,” I assured her, more politely than sincerely. Delighted or not, though, I was determined.

I WAS VERY WELL AWARE OF THE TIME REQUIRED TO complete a journey between my home and Tillinghast’s, so it was not miscalculation that led me to arrive a full two hours early, some thirty minutes ahead of the estimate that Rachel had given me of the time of her own arrival. Given that I had to go, and to go in the capacity of a lady’s champion, I wanted to check the place out in advance—or, rather, I wanted to check myself out in proximity to the house, to make sure that I could tolerate the environment. For that reason, I took care to reach the house while the sun had not yet begun to turn crimson as it sank into the wilderness of the west, but was still blazing benignly yellow in a clear blue sky.

I did not take a motorized cab, having always felt more comfortable in horse-drawn transport, but I regretted that slightly, for the final section of the road that led to Tillinghast’s house was even more replete with ruts and potholes than I remembered it, and I felt certain that I would not have been jolted nearly as much by a vehicle with pneumatic tires as I was in the two-wheeled trap. In the past, I had ridden out the jolts with casual disdain, but now, I was frightened that they might start my head aching, with the henceforth-inevitable accompaniment of spots before my eyes. The driver, too, seemed direly resentful of the road’s condition—for which he naturally blamed me personally—and set off on the return journey sulkily, with a pained expression on his face, as if fearful that his frail vehicle might disintegrate under the stress.

I carried my bags to the front porch and set them down beside the door. Then I began a circumnavigation of the house. I could have gone inside immediately—I knew where Tillinghast had hid his spare key and was sure that no one would have removed it—but it did not seem polite to anticipate Rachel in that respect, and I was confident that I could make an initial assessment of my own state of mind as easily by peering in through the windows as by going inside.

I ambled around the house and its annexes. I peered through the windows, which seemed to have attracted an unusual amount of grime since they had been washed. I tested the kitchen door to make sure that it was locked. I sat down briefly in the back garden. I even looked up, once or twice, at the windows on the first floor and the eaves—but not at the ridge of the roof or the weathervane—and I kept my hat on while I did so, so that the slightest adjustment of my head would bring its censorious brim into play.

I did not see anything untoward. I could hear the weathervane, though; there was an unsteady breeze blowing, sometimes from the east and sometimes from the southeast, from the not-so-distant sea. The vane—whose ornament, I knew from memory, was shaped like a fish rather than the conventional cockerel—creaked as it swayed, obedient to the atmospheric indecision.

I knew that the sound of the weathervane was perfectly natural, but there was something else, perhaps beyond hearing as well as beyond sight, that did not seem quite *right*. I remembered that Tillinghast's machine had somehow retained a visible glow even when its electricity supply was switched off, once his experiments had begun. Tillinghast had suggested that it was ultraviolet light somehow made visible, but that made no sense, and I had realized at the time that the interpretation was a symptom of his mental derangement—but however nonsensical his suggested explanation might have been, the glow had been real. The machine had been affected by its experimental use. Perhaps, I thought, the house had been affected too, in a subtler but nevertheless substantial way—and the weathervane most of all, given its metal constitution and its proximity to the machine.

Then I told myself not to be silly, and that it was all in my mind—that even the glow in the machine had been in my mind, the first symptom of hallucination. When I returned to the front of the house again, after twelve or fifteen minutes, a little more confident in my sanity, there was a man on the porch, looking down pensively at my luggage. There was no horse or vehicle outside the gate; he must have walked—although I did not remember passing any pedestrians as I was following my own jolting course along the road.

We looked one another up and down. He was tall and bony, perhaps forty years of age, with a tanned leathery complexion and eyes as dark as his

near-black hair. He had the advantage of me. Of the three vultures who had contacted me, the only one I had ever met in the flesh was Patterway; this was not him. Given that he was staying in the same hotel as his two rivals, he presumably knew that I was neither of them, and that allowed him to jump to the correct conclusion.

“Mr. Dearden, I presume,” he said.

I almost hazarded a guess when he paused, but he saved me the trouble. “Lyman Dove,” he supplied. “I wrote to you, if you recall.”

“I recall,” I said, curtly. “Mrs. Tillinghast isn’t here yet—didn’t she give you an appointment?”

“Oh yes,” he said, “but I wanted to take a look at the place in advance—to soak up a little of the atmosphere, as it were. Mrs. Tillinghast mentioned that you would be here, but I didn’t know that you would be coming in advance. I apologize if I’ve inconvenienced you in any way.”

I did not accept the apology—nor did I offer him one, although I suspected that my presence might be inconveniencing him more than his was inconveniencing me.

“The breeze is always welcome at this time of year,” I observed, although I knew perfectly well that the “atmosphere” in which he was interested was no mere matter of molecules of air. “Cooling, without bringing the odor of fish from the coastal canneries.”

“Do you still find that noticeable nowadays?” he asked. “Since the cod began to shun the cape that bears their name, I rarely catch a whiff. I’m almost nostalgic for it, on occasion—although I ought to be grateful for anything that helps to keep my sensory channels clear. How are you coping with your migraines, Mr. Dearden?”

The immediate temptation was to reply “What migraines?”—but to do so would have seemed like an admission of weakness, conceding the tempo of the contest to him. I did not jump to the conclusion that he had been investigating me, although I was aware that a private detective had been asking questions, presumably having been hired to discover whether I had any of Tillinghast’s papers. Indeed, I was more inclined to believe that he was taking a guess based on something else he knew—or thought he knew. Two could play at that game.

“Under control,” I lied. “How are yours?”

“Too controlled, alas,” he replied, serenely. “Consciousness is such a traitor, at times. We think of it as the vehicle of the will, but that is too narrow a view. Such will-power as we have is, for the most part, channeled through it, but its principal role is to function as a protective wall. Patterway, of course, thinks that was erected to filter experience wisely rather than simply to imprison us, but he’s an exceptionally narrow-minded man. Do you know James Patterway?”

“We’ve met,” I confirmed.

“Then you know what I mean; he wears his narrowness as a badge of pride. To be expected in a university man, I suppose, though less so at Miskatonic than elsewhere. Have you met Robert Crisson too?”

“No,” I said, not wanting to stretch insincerity to the point of blatant irony by saying that I hadn’t had the pleasure.

“He’s open-minded, as befits a dilettante condemned to unorthodoxy—but I fear that he’s one of those in which openness sometimes tends to vacancy. He’s the real adversary, of course, if we’re in competition—or rather, his money is. Patterway has his professorial status, though, and you have... the appeal of friendship, I suppose.”

Dove seemed to be assuming that I was there for the same reason as everyone else—to try to take possession of Tillinghast’s work, or part of it—but I didn’t bother to correct his misapprehension, or rise to his bait, if he was merely attempting a ploy.

“And what do you have, Mr. Dove?” I asked.

“Only my charm,” he said, smiling as if it were a joke. He must have read in my face, however, that I’d taken the remark the wrong way. “Oh, I’ve no intention of behaving toward Mrs. Tillinghast in any way unbecoming a gentleman. What I hope to do is to seduce all five of us into an amicable and fruitful collaboration. Crisson’s not malicious or jealous by nature; it’s only the possession of his money that tempts him to play the monopolist. He can be persuaded. Patterway’s more of an intellectual hoarder, but he’s not unreasonable; he’ll bend if necessary. How about you, Mr. Dearden? Are you a team player or a one-man band?”

I was saved from the necessity of answering that particular impertinence by the sight and sound of Rachel Tillinghast’s Ford powering along the roadway, lurching from side to side as it hit the potholes. I hoped that the

pneumatic tires and the suspension-springs were cushioning Rachel and her maid from any substantial bruising.

Dove and I watched the automobile draw to a halt. I was quicker off the mark in racing to help the widow with her luggage—although, in truth, the chauffeur did not need much help. I left Dove to introduce himself, rather hoping that Rachel might tell him to go away and come back at the agreed time—but she seemed a trifle flustered and evidently wanted to give further instructions to the chauffeur, presumably to do with laying in supplies. While she was outside the house doing that and I was carrying various bags upstairs, the front door remained open, and Dove was inside before anyone could devise a stratagem for keeping him out.

Rachel settled for ignoring him and concentrating all her attention on me when I came down again. She didn't tell me that I hadn't aged a bit since the last time she had seen me, because it would have been too evidently untrue. I might have paid her the equivalent compliment, but it didn't seem necessary. She had not put on much weight—remarkable in a woman who had been a trifle stout even in her twenties—and her angular face was still relatively wrinkle-free, but her hair had begun to go gray and she had not condescended to begin dyeing it. Her best feature was still her frank blue-green eyes.

She thanked me profusely for coming and insisted a trifle too lavishly on her regret at not having seen me for so long and her gratitude to me for keeping my friendship with her husband so firm. "When the police told me that you had been arrested, I was outraged," she said. "If you had fired a gun, I told them, it was certainly not at my husband. That was unthinkable. You might very well, I said, have been defending him—but attacking him, never."

"The error was of short duration," I assured her. "The lack of a bullet-hole in the body told that story for me—although it took a little longer for the medical examiner to determine the true cause of death."

"Crawford was always a victim of his unreliable capacity for passion," she said. "His explosive excitability was bound to expose any flaw in his make-up eventually—and the brain is such a delicate organ, so prone to sudden hemorrhages."

"He had been working too hard, I fear," I told her. "Science benefits from commitment—one might almost say obsession—in a purely methodological

sense, but there is often a human cost to be paid for such long hours and deep commitment. I urged him to take more rest and more exercise, but he felt that he was reaching a climax in his achievement and could not be persuaded.” I had to be a trifle diplomatic; I did not know whether she had seen his body before its cremation, and whether she knew the extent to which he had changed.

“I’m glad that you were with him at the end,” she said.

I had no reply to that—certainly not “So am I”—and Dove, who was not even bothering to pretend that he was not eavesdropping on the conversation, could contain himself no longer.

“It’s a great shame that your defense proved unavailing,” he remarked, belying his claim to natural charm, “and an even greater shame, from the viewpoint of science, that your bullet hit the machine.” He did not ask what I had been firing at, perhaps slyly hoping to prompt Rachel into asking the question—but she did not rise to his bait either.

“I believe we have an appointment for eight, Mr. Dove,” she said, coldly. “In the meantime, David and I have private matters to discuss. I don’t mean to be rude, but I must ask you to leave now, and come back at eight.”

He had grace enough not to scowl at the summary dismissal, and merely said “Of course. Until eight, Mrs. Tillinghast, Mr. Dearden,” before putting his hat back on and closing the door behind him.

“It could have been worse,” I said. “You might have found all three camped on the doorstep.” She was already moving away, though, in the direction of Tillinghast’s attic laboratory.

I took my courage in both hands and followed her.

ALTHOUGH THEY HAD FIGURED OUT SOON ENOUGH that the laboratory was not, in fact, a “crime scene,” the police had nevertheless made a start at gathering “evidence,” and had also sent in a cleaning crew to sanitize the carpet where Tillinghast had fallen and died. The fragments of the machine had been packed away in a tea-chest, although the batteries that the scientist had employed to supply it with current were still lined up in the customary stern array. None of the fragments was glowing; there was not the slightest trace of any uncanny radiance in the room, although the

light of the electric bulb in the ceiling, drawing power from the batteries, did seem a trifle unsteady.

Rachel looked around carefully. She inspected the wreckage of the machine with a keen gaze, although she did not remove the debris from the tea-chest, but she also examined the rest of the room carefully, opening the drawers in the table and examining the various items of apparatus on the shelves at close range.

“I suppose he kept his papers in the study,” she said, eventually.

I did not want to ask whether she was actually contemplating selling anything she could find to Crisson. “I fear that his record-keeping became somewhat lax in the last few months of his endeavor,” I told her, truthfully. “Doubtless he would have written it all up eventually, but he was too caught up in the fervor of creativity. It might well be the case that you’ll find nothing in his desk and filing-cabinet that he hasn’t already communicated to his correspondents while consulting their expertise.”

“But he talked to you about what he was doing—even in those last weeks?”

“He talked,” I agreed, “but I fear that my understanding of what he said was rather limited. Patterway would have understood what he was saying and would have known what questions to ask in order to obtain more precision, but I didn’t. I fear that Crisson’s private detective was probably wasting his time—I doubt that there’s any document here or elsewhere that would provide a vital clue to anyone seeking to replicate Crawford’s work.”

She did not seem surprised at my mention of the detective and did not query the assumption that Crisson must have been the one who had hired him. Her eyes went back to the tea-chest, but her gaze did not seem avid; it was not the commercial value of the fragments that was on her mind. I watched her silently, preoccupied myself with a feeling of oddity in my head, which was not exactly a pain, as yet, but did not seem to bode well. I was not yet suffering the visual distortions that were the invariable prelude to my migraines, however, and that reassured me that no peril was imminent.

“What’s that noise?” Rachel asked, suddenly, with a hint of alarm in her voice. She, too, appeared to have become gradually uneasy—unsurprisingly, given the circumstances.

“Only the weathervane,” I told her. “It’s quite close at hand here, on top of that chimney-stack.” I pointed to the bare bricks of the flue that rose up in the middle of the attic floor, rudely cutting through the improvised boards, and disappeared into the slanting joists to protrude through the tiles. The roof was designed in the French mansard style, with two distinct pitches, in order to offer more space within for storage or living; but Tillinghast, ever the utilitarian, had never seen fit to tack lath and plaster over the brickwork or the joists and paper over the surface, in order to make the space look more like a conventional room.

“I thought it might be rats,” she said, defensively.

“There’s not so much as a mouse up here,” I assured her. “No birds’ nests or roosting bats.” All that was true; I did not care to think about what it might leave unmentioned.

She had had enough procrastination. She looked me squarely in the eye and said: “What happened, David?”

She meant, of course: “What were you shooting at?”

I had told the police that I had made a mistake—that the strange electric lighting associated with Tillinghast’s experiment had generated peculiar shadows, and that I had mistakenly believed that there was an intruder in the room with us, whose manner had seemed threatening. The medical examiner—a man possessed of pet theories—had told me, with an odd combination of sympathy and imperiousness, that I must have been hypnotized, but I did not want to repeat that to Rachel. The doctor had met Tillinghast more than once while he was still alive and had obviously formed the impression that he had mesmeric powers, but Rachel and I both knew that any such supposition was nonsense. The medical examiner had not found any evidence of any modification to Tillinghast’s pineal body apart from the hemorrhage, of course; he had not looked for it, and probably would not have been able to detect anything untoward if he had.

“I thought the machine was doing us harm,” I told her, after a slight pause, opting for the truth, if not quite the whole truth. “Its effect was causing us to see things that were not there. The sensation was deeply disturbing—even more so in Crawford’s case, I think, than in mine, because he had exposed himself to it before. Perhaps it was foolish of me to take out the gun, but I hit what I aimed at—although that might, in all honesty, have

been an unlikelier event than my hitting the machine by accident, having fired at something else entirely.”

“Is that what killed him?” she asked, bluntly. “Something he saw, or thought he saw?”

“How can I tell?” I countered, accurately enough. “Does it matter?”

She was still looking into my eyes, as if trying to read my mind. What she saw, I cannot tell, beyond the obvious—but I felt, as I looked into her blue-green eyes, that I could see grief therein, and an irreducible residue of love and regret.

It occurred to me, suddenly, that she blamed herself. She was thinking that if she had not left her husband—if she had stuck to her vows and stayed with him no matter what—perhaps he would never have built the machine... or even if he had, perhaps she would have been able to save him, somehow, from its dire effects.

Perhaps, I thought, she was right.

“It was my fault,” I told her, feeling that I ought at least to share her burden. “I saw what was happening to him in the weeks before he gave me that final demonstration. I should have known that it was leading to disaster. I should have stopped him. I had the opportunity.”

“But you didn’t have the motive or the means,” she said, her voice hardly more than a whisper. “No, David, it wasn’t your fault. He was a grown man—in his forties, for God’s sake—fully responsible for himself.”

“The machine is dangerous,” I told her. “I can’t be sure exactly how, but it is. That’s not going to stop Crisson wanting to buy the pieces, though, or Patterway wanting to get them into the laboratories at Miskatonic for painstaking investigation, or Dove wanting to charm himself into some kind of collaboration with either or both of them. Nor will it stop them if the pieces prove unhelpful and there are no specific plans—they’ll just take the view that it will take them a little longer to duplicate the work, starting from an earlier stage.”

“They’re grown men too,” she said. “Patterway’s older than Crawford, Dove must be almost the same age, and Crisson only four or five years younger. They’re entitled to be architects of their own fate—and they’ve already had a demonstrative warning, even if they didn’t have the front-row seat that you did.”

She was right. I went with the flow. “Perhaps you should hand everything over to one or all of them and wish them luck,” I said, judging that to be what she wanted me to say, by way of endorsement. “But the one thing you shouldn’t do is involve yourself.”

She nodded slowly—but only to indicate that she understood, not that she had come to a decision. She relaxed her stare, though.

“Thank you for being here, David,” she said. “Alone, I’m not sure that I’d have had the strength... Let’s go back down. I’m hungry, aren’t you? Craven should be back with the supplies by now, and Janine’s a tolerable cook... tolerable in every capacity, in fact.” She didn’t have to explain why the servants’ presence didn’t count, in terms of her being—or feeling—alone.

“Yes,” I said, “best get something to eat, ready for the vultures’ landing.”

“Vultures?” she queried.

“Jackals?” I suggested, as a potential alternative.

“Let’s hope so,” she said. “I wouldn’t want them turning into Hydes.”

I laughed, although, as macabre wordplay went, it really didn’t seem to be very funny.

HAVING SURVIVED THE ATTIC LABORATORY UNSCATHED, I FELT that I was holding up well, fully capable of playing the knight all night, if necessary—but I was overconfident. Absurd as it may seem, it was the dinner that seemed to do the damage. Not that there was anything wrong with the preparation, which was pedestrian but competent, or even the choice of menu, which was predictable enough and quite familiar... but there was *something* about it that had a triggering effect.

Craven had done what everyone in the state tended to do when shopping for a meal to be eaten the same day, and had bought fresh seafood—not cod, which was still considered commonplace even though the fish themselves no longer arrived at the Grand Banks every year in vast profusion, nor lobster, which was also considered a trifle vulgar, but herring and octopus. I had eaten both hundreds of times before, sometimes even in the same meal, and had never feared either, although I had the normal anxieties regarding mussels and oysters—but not all octopodes are alike, it seems. Indeed, if I

judged correctly, in spite of its careful slicing, the one of which I ate the greater share must have had more than eight limbs; I almost commented on it, wondering aloud whether a ten-tentacled octopus might have the same status as a good-luck charm as a four-leafed shamrock, but refrained. Perhaps I had a premonition that the effect might be opposite... if the octopus really was the guilty party.

At any rate, I had hardly finished drinking my coffee when I began to feel ill—not merely odd, but genuinely ill. I began to see the floaters too.

I had consulted my doctor about the migraines and their hallucinatory spinoff, of course, and he had referred me to a specialist ophthalmologist, who had taken the usual hobby-horse rider's delight in explaining to me at great length what was going on. He assured me that visual phenomena often preceded migraines, and that recent study had begun to produce an elaborate classification of them. He waxed lyrical about floaters—that was the term he used, and seemed delighted that I had come up with it independently—and gave me an uncannily accurate description of their appearance and behavior without my giving him any substantial hints in advance. He was duly proud of the acumen of his science when I confirmed his observations.

“Is it really normal for them to appear to pass through walls and other solid objects?” I had asked him.

“But of course,” he had replied. “They’re an illusion conjured up by your brain; they have no need to obey the laws of solid-state physics, or those of optics. They’re phantoms. I have patients who suffer much worse, believe me. When people begin to lose their sight, because of the deterioration of the retina or the clouding of the cornea, the brain often substitutes for the lack of information received by producing hallucinations far more complex than yours—sinister enough, merely by virtue of their unreality, even when the imaginary objects are perfectly ordinary, but they often seem menacing, even monstrous.”

“Monstrous?” I repeated. “How monstrous?”

“I suspect that that depends on the personality of the individual. None of us has an entirely clear conscience, alas, and our poor brains are sometimes at the mercy of our fears. You have no need to worry unduly yet, though. Having passed forty, you’re beginning to suffer from the effects of a hardened lens and the fact that the muscles controlling it are getting weaker

—that’s why you’re more prone to suffer disturbing effects late in the day, when the eye-muscles get tired—and the fact that you’ve always been short-sighted means that the developing long-sightedness is causing you particular confusions. But I can’t see any other signs of physical deterioration: no glaucoma, no cataracts, no retinal detachment. There’s just the migraines. When they come on, you need to lie down in a dark room and keep still. I’ll give you a prescription that will help numb the effects.”

In fact, he had given me several prescriptions, in series, for various sedatives, beginning with chloral and moving via tincture of cannabis to laudanum. None of them had helped; all of them, in fact, seemed to have made things worse. I had abandoned them all.

“I’m truly sorry,” I said to Rachel, “but I shall have to lie down for a while, in order to dispel a headache. I promise that I’ll be ready and able to lend you any support you might need by eight, when the vultures descend; but in order to be ready and able, I need to get my body and brain under control, and the only way to do that is by means of careful self-discipline.”

“Of course,” she said. “Poor David—have *you* been working too hard?”

In fact, I had hardly been working at all. Although we schoolteachers always claim that the notion that the long summer break is pure holiday is a myth, we are mostly trying to conceal our indolence. I had not opened a book or picked up a pen since mid-July. Fortunately, Rachel took my denial as a further sign of heroic modesty.

The bedroom I had been assigned was next to Tillinghast’s study, and when I lay down with a blindfold over my eyes, attempting perfect stillness, I could hear her rummaging through the drawers of the desk and the filing-cabinet, each of which made an individually distinguishable creak as it opened and closed. I could tell that she was being assiduous, but I knew that she was merely being methodical. She was not searching with the avid determination that the jackals would have brought to the task, eager to fall upon some scrap of paper containing a hopefully crucial wiring-diagram or list of instrument-settings. She had always been a neat and orderly housekeeper while she was living in the house—habits carried over, I assumed, from her earlier career as a laboratory technician.

As the migraine developed, however, I soon lost interest in creaks from the study and in Rachel’s subsequent movements as she continued to take inventory of her shabby inheritance. No matter how hard I tried to instruct

my brain to see only what my eyes registered was really present, the floaters continued to swim around the inner space of my mind.

Had I not been wearing the blindfold, I knew, I would have seen them moving back and forth through the walls and ceiling of my room—and also moving through the bed, my own body, and one another. When they seemed to be paradoxically present in the three-dimensional world revealed to sight, they often gave the impression of being living things, akin to sea-creatures—more often jellyfish and sea-cucumbers than cephalopods or fish, but not obedient to any very rigid system of classification. Exiled to the dark behind my eyes, however, they seemed more alien than that, as if they were no longer completely defined by their shapes, or any resemblance to earthly species.

Perhaps it is absurd to say so—the most bizarre of all my hallucinations—but I was beginning to conceive of the inner spaces of my mind not as a three-dimensional space analogous to the framework of sight, but as something more complex and convoluted. I deem that absurd because, after all, we have no other way of imagining any space other than by analogy with the model created by sight. I say “created by sight” rather than “perceived by sight” because one has to maintain a certain intellectual awareness of the difference between the phenomenal and noumenal worlds, even if perception will not allow us to be aware of any. Intellectual respectability demands Kantian doubt, lest we surrender to the mere brutality of sensory tyranny; we are human, after all.

Even so, the mere awareness of the theoretical possibility of other modes of sensory perception should not be enough to allow us to imagine them. Conceiving of the *idea* of a fourth dimension, or any kind of multidimensional plenum of parallel worlds, cannot be enough to allow us to imagine such a fourth dimension or some such plenum inside our heads, whether we are dreaming or focusing our attention as intently as possible, because the analogical apparatus simply is not there... or should not be there.

And yet... when my eyes were firmly closed, and the illusory floaters produced by my malfunctioning brain were exiled to a purely theoretical space, where they could no longer mimic creatures of the sea, I sometimes began to imagine that I could see *beyond* their shape, into the dimensions of which those apparent shapes were mere cross-sections, and that in seeing

them in that augmented fashion, I could see the imaginary space in which they seemed to be framed as something more, something more far-reaching, something far more complex.

According to Tillinghast's thesis, there is no such thing as empty space—merely space whose fabric and contents are inaccessible to our senses: “dark matter,” he called it, although he was at pains to assert that it was neither dark nor matter, and that only the restrictions of the language necessitated the use of such an inadequate label. According to Tillinghast, even before his mental distortion became multidimensional, the space between a man's eye and his outstretched hand actually contained billions or trillions of parallel universes, which ought not to be imagined as the passages of a book, neatly stacked and similar, but as entities possessed of all manner of shapes and sizes, entangled in unimaginably complex ways, some so tiny as to fit in labyrinthine fashion within the atoms of our universe and others so vast as to fit ours within one of their own atoms.

“And are there monsters there?” I had asked him once.

“In some, no doubt,” he said, “but only those few sufficiently similar to ours to have imaginable contents.”

I tried to put those memories out of my mind while I fought the migraine and tried to force my pineal body to regain its erstwhile quietness. I told myself, sternly, that it did not matter whether the body in question was actually functioning as an organ of perceptions, or whether it was merely a source of illusory nightmares, or whether it really was, as Descartes had proposed, the true seat of the soul. The point was to calm its excitement, reduce it to frigidity and indifference—as Tillinghast clearly had not been able to do. Sometimes I thought that I ought to have been the scientist and he the schoolteacher, but men are paradoxical creatures, whose vocations are not always in harmony with their temperaments.

The pain didn't help, of course. Quite the contrary. As it increased, in fact, it almost blotted out the capacity for conscious thought—and without the accompaniment of conscious thought, perception itself becomes incoherent. I wish I could say “impossible,” but far from it; however incoherent it becomes, perception remains—and such is the tyranny that three-dimensional perception exerts on conscious rationality that it is when perception becomes incoherent that it becomes most ambitious, and most perilous.

I tried to concentrate, very hard, on the real: the disparate sounds of three sets of footfalls, in three different parts of the house; the creaking of the weathervane, more insistent now that nightfall was freshening the sea-breeze; the slight odor of dead fish that the breeze brought with it and insinuated through the cracks in the walls of the house; the tangible beating of my own heart and the susurrus of the blood in my arteries. It worked, to the extent that it could, but the pain grew worse, and distortion of the dimensions became subversive, rebellious, anarchic...

I have no sympathy with people who describe their pain as “unbearable.” If it were truly unbearable, it would kill them. Whatever we have survived was, *ipso facto*, bearable. There are times, however, when one cannot help but wonder whether one might, in fact, be on the point of dying—or, at least, on the point of fracture—when pain is hammering away inside one, especially inside one’s head. All pain is, of course, felt within the brain, even when it seems to be coming from an ankle, a finger, or the abdomen, but there is something about the self-referential experience that one’s brain is actually *doing* the hurting that seems to add an extra twist to the agony...

But I mustn’t go on. For one thing, there’s nothing more to say. I had a headache—a migraine, in more pretentious terms. It lasted for an hour or so and then began to calm down. That was it. It was bad, but it was manifestly not unbearable. In the beginning, there were strange impressions, odd ideas, wild fancies, but after a while there was only pain. Anything else I might say is retrospective, hypothetical—and perhaps, of necessity, a little crazy.

The problem I had with sedatives, especially cannabis and laudanum, was that they enhance the craziness. If they numbed the pain—and I’m not entirely sure that they did, in the particular case of my migraines—they compensated by enhancing its illusory side-effects. Given that the pain was, and had proven itself to be, bearable, it seemed to me that what had to be combated, above all else, was the craziness. It was, after all, the craziness that had killed Tillinghast. He had seen something other than mere floaters, something infinitely more terrible. Perhaps, as my kindly ophthalmologist had suggested, it had just been a product of his own particular personality, his idiosyncratic burden of common-or-garden accumulated guilt feelings... but what reassurance was there in that?

Perhaps, I thought then, if the craziness got too solid a grip on me, I wouldn’t see the same things that Tillinghast saw when he looked up—or,

to be strictly accurate, in the direction *beyond up*—but that might only mean that I would see something even more terrible *to me*. I honestly didn't know which was the worse alternative: that I might see the ultimate imaginary incarnation of my own private guilt and fear, or that I might see something real, reaching out from some dimension elsewhere in the plenum to capture me, devour me, rip me apart, or compel me to undergo some kind of radical metamorphosis... which might, hypothetically speaking, be benign, but probably wouldn't.

I CAME DOWNSTAIRS AT SEVEN-THIRTY PRECISELY. I wasn't completely well, as yet, but the pain was ebbing away and I knew that mere movement and conversation could not turn that particular tide. The floaters hadn't entirely vanished, but they were fading, in a manner that I could not help but deem discreet and polite. It was almost as if the haunters of the house, if any remained from Tillinghast's unwise evocation, were eager to hear what might come of the confrontation between Rachel and myself on the one hand, and the vultures or jackals on the other, and did not want any of the participants to be unduly inhibited.

Rachel already had a glass of bourbon in her hand when I appeared in the drawing-room, where the chairs were already set out in the appropriate number and conformation, in accordance with her tidy habits. Craven had brought down the tea-chest containing the remains of the fatal machine, and there were three stacks of paper on an occasional table beside it, with the edges squared to the extent that they could be. She poured me a glass of liquor without asking; she knew that my habits, too, would not have changed overmuch.

"Are you feeling better?" she inquired, solicitously.

"Much. Did you find any useful documents in Crawford's study?" I squirmed in my chair in search of a comfortable position.

"I'm hardly competent to judge," she said, "but you were right, of course. He was scrupulous in dating his observations, and I could find nothing bearing any date within ten weeks of his death. He might well have taken his ultimate secret to the grave. Is there any reason apart from the implicit

danger of the line of research, do you think, why I shouldn't hand them over to Patterway or Crisson?"

"If you're wondering whether there might be any practical application of the work, which might one day make Crisson a fortune to compare with Edison's, then I'm no more competent to judge than you are. I doubt it—but who can tell?"

"I'm not worried about money," she said. "Like Crawford—and you—I have enough, and am content with that." There was the briefest of pauses before she added: "Are you content, David?"

"With my income, yes," I said. The implied exception was my state of health; in the circumstances, my ebbing migraine was still uppermost in my mind as a barrier to contentment. She, however, had obviously been thinking along other lines.

"Why did you never marry?" she asked.

"I never met the right woman," I replied, almost reflexively. I didn't meet her eyes. Had I not been feeling uncomfortable anyway, I think I might have begun at the point—especially if I had met her eyes.

"Do you feel lonely," she asked, "now that Crawford's gone? You'd been fast friends for such a long time."

"I suppose I do," I admitted.

"I do," she said. "It may seem absurd to say so, given that we were living apart and very rarely saw one another, but..."

"But knowing that he was there, somewhere within reach, made a difference," I finished for her. "I understand." I thought I did. I had never been in love myself, but I thought I knew enough of human nature to understand why there was a difference between loving someone who was absent but alive, and loving someone who was dead.

"You're not too old," she said—meaning not too old to find the right woman, to marry, to obtain a cure for loneliness, to achieve the goal of contentment. She was right, in a way; age wasn't the problem. The migraines were. Life may depend on the liver, but true love depends on the frontal lobes. If the brain is out of kilter, contentment is out of reach.

"No, I'm not," was what I said aloud, in a politely dismissive fashion.

"I'm sorry you felt ill," she said. "It was the octopus, I think. Seafood can be untrustworthy, sometimes. The sea may be the mother of all life, but her cornucopia isn't entirely reliable." There was a slight hint of bitterness in

her voice. I had no idea whether she and Tillinghast had ever tried to determine why it was that they had never had children, or what the doctor might have given them by way of an explanation why they hadn't.

"It might have been partly the octopus," I agreed, "but I've been getting the migraines quite frequently of late, so there must be some kind of inherent flaw."

"You've consulted a doctor?"

"Of course, and an eye-specialist. They're still groping for an effective treatment—but these things sometimes pass of their own accord." *And sometimes don't*, I didn't add.

I was feeling more comfortable now, even though I'd hardly touched the bourbon. I took a substantial gulp when the doorbell rang, though. I felt that in order to provide Rachel with moral support, I might well need some of my own.

Her three visitors had obviously traveled together, on foot rather than by any kind of cab. None of them was out of breath, though—not even Patterway, who must have been ten years older than Dove and fifteen years older than Crisson. Patterway was taller than Dove, and thinner, and had far less hair on his head; of the three, he bore the greatest physical resemblance to a vulture. Crisson was short and plump, but possessed of a kind of healthy glow and exuberance of manner that distanced him from any resemblance to any kind of scavenger.

There were the customary formal introductions, polite handshakes, and conventional offers of refreshment, but the vultures hastened through all that, keen to get down to business.

They took the pieces of Tillinghast's machine out of the tea-chest and laid them out on the carpet, reverently but with a hint of careless disorder that must have offended poor Rachel. They picked them up, passed them from hand to hand, turned them over, and bemoaned their parlous state. They took turns poring over the three piles of documents, no more enthused.

Eventually, they got around to the inevitable question.

"Are you sure that there isn't anything more?" Patterway asked Rachel.

"Quite certain," she said. "There's nothing hidden away in some safe or secret drawer—my husband wasn't that kind of man, as you know."

“Which leaves us,” Crisson said, “with only one as-yet-untapped resource.” He was looking at me.

“I can’t help you, gentlemen,” I said. “Mrs. Tillinghast didn’t ask me here in order that I might give you information, but merely as a family friend. In any case, Tillinghast never gave me any papers to look after. I really don’t have anything to offer you.”

“Don’t be disingenuous, Mr. Dearden,” said Dove, silkily. “Tillinghast talked to you, and even if you didn’t fully understand what he said, you heard it. More importantly, you saw the machine set up and working, and even if you didn’t understand what you saw, you did see it. You may not know how much you know, or appreciate the importance of its details, but you certainly know things that no one else knows.”

And how, I thought.

What I said aloud was: “I really don’t remember how the components of the machine were configured, and I’m perfectly certain that Tillinghast said nothing to me that would be of use to you. He treated me as any scientist would treat a high-school history teacher, as an ignoramus incapable of understanding the words that he would normally employ in communication with his fellow scientists, only able to follow the most rudimentary explanations couched in layman’s terms. I’m sure that he went into greater detail regarding the fundamentals and direction of his research when writing to you than he ever did in talking to me.”

They weren’t satisfied. How could they be? They were no longer paying much attention to Rachel, although I daresay that she could have reclaimed their attention, had she wanted to, by initiating some kind of bargaining process with regard to the scattered remnants of Tillinghast’s machine. She, however, was content to let me take the pressure off, to serve as her protective knight—and the vultures wanted to know what had happened when Tillinghast’s machine had functioned, as exactly as I could remember it. It was not going to be easy to keep them at bay, now that they were gathered around me.

“Perhaps we can give you some guidance,” Patterway suggested. “If we can spell out the extent of our knowledge, you might be in a better position to judge whether you can add anything to it. What I understand is that Tillinghast was attempting to deploy electrical current in the generation of a new form of energy, distinct from light, heat, or Hertzian waves, and

perhaps from the entire electromagnetic spectrum. I'm not entirely clear as to what detection and measuring devices he intended to use in order to register the presence and estimate the properties of this new energy, but..."

"I do," Dove put in. "You're looking at it. Dearden was the detector, and the measuring device—or, to be more precise, his brain."

"I don't want to get into all your nonsense about sixth senses and other dimensions at present, Dove," Patterway interjected. "Fundamentally, this is a problem in physics—or, at least, the physics is prior to any question of application. That's why the apparatus has to be examined carefully and properly, in a university laboratory, rather than simply being handed over to Crisson so that he can *tinker* with it. If there's any possibility that Tillinghast was on the track of some fundamental discovery—however slim the probability might be—then it needs expert and disciplined investigation. It's unlikely that he obtained a significant result, but the man was certainly no fool. The components of his machine aren't very exotic, but that's not surprising. The key will lie in the way they were connected up—and any chance we had of establishing that easily has gone, not so much because of Mr. Dearden's unfortunate stray bullet as the casual way in which the police dealt with the damaged apparatus thereafter."

"That's why we need you to do your utmost to remember every last detail that you can," Crisson put in. "If we can put the jigsaw together, as it were, sufficiently to reveal some sort of tangible effect—any sort of effect—then we'll be able to set off on the track of Patterway's novel radiation... and any practical applications it might have."

"Producing the radiation isn't the central issue," Dove said, sounding slightly exasperated. "For all we know, the radiation might be all around us, in the same way that all sorts of electromagnetic radiation are around us, unapprehended by our senses and measuring devices—indeed, it almost certainly is, although Tillinghast's machine presumably intensifies it in some way. In the same way that Röntgen's discovery of X-rays depended on the accidental presence of a photogenic plate in a drawer to render their properties evident, however, we need some way of detecting and paving the way to an analysis of Tillinghast rays... or whatever they might end up being called. Tillinghast was convinced that, under the right conditions, his radiation would be directly perceptible by the human sensorium, and if he was right... well, Mr. Dearden ought to be able to tell us far more about that

than about the set-up of the machine, any details of which he can remember will probably turn out to be trivial. What I'm particularly interested to know, Mr. Dearden, is what *else* you saw, in addition to the assembled machine."

It is easy to refuse such requests when they come by letter, or even when they come singly in person—but under the right conditions, they can build up a pressure that is hard to resist. However skeptical Patterway the pure physicist and Crisson the technological tinkerer might have been about the mystical aspects of Dove's theories, they knew that he had a point. In any case, I had already let go of part of my secret in making Rachel party to it, and the only reason I had for holding on to the rest was the fear that talking about it might make me seem crazy.

"Tillinghast's machine caused hallucinations," I said, wearily. "I don't pretend to know how, exactly, but I know that it did—and if hallucinations can be produced chemically, by opium and other compounds, then I can't see any *a priori* reason why they shouldn't be produced by some kind of radiation. Perhaps they are, routinely, when consciousness relaxes and we become vulnerable to dreams; perhaps all that opium and other chemical hallucinogens do is relax consciousness in such a way as to let ambient Tillinghast radiation take fuller effect. That isn't my province. On the other hand, even though you might think that being a high-school history teacher isn't much of an intellectual qualification, I'm no fool, and I've been carrying out my own retrospective investigation of what I saw."

I told them, then, what the ophthalmologist had told me about floaters and migraines, and how I'd extrapolated it to take account of what I had seen while Tillinghast's machine had been operative—and what *he* had seen, to the extent that he had communicated it to me. I even admitted to having fired at the machine deliberately, to cut short its terrible effect.

"You couldn't just have unplugged it?" suggested Crisson, bitterly.

"I wasn't thinking entirely logically," I admitted.

"How come you had a gun, anyway?" Crisson demanded.

"I was robbed at gunpoint in East Providence last year," I told him. "It shook me up rather badly. I began carrying a gun because it restored something of my shattered sense of security."

"You're not carrying one now, I hope?" Patterway observed.

I didn't answer that. "The point is," I said, "that the machine is dangerous, Tillinghast radiation is dangerous. Perhaps, if my nerves hadn't still been a little raw after the robbery, I wouldn't have been so vulnerable to it. I don't know what caused Tillinghast's vulnerability, although it can't have helped that he'd probably been going without sleep for days on end. It can't have helped, either, that his servants had packed up and left, so determinedly that the police couldn't find them—although I don't suppose they looked very hard, once they were told that his death was perfectly natural. Whatever the reason was, though, he was frightened, and he was always a trifle volatile. My one regret, looking back, is that I didn't act sooner... much sooner. I don't regret the gunshot—only that took me so long to fire it. And if I had simply unplugged the machine, I dread to think what might have happened when Tillinghast activated it again—because he would have done so, terrified as he was."

"Of course he would," said Patterway. "He was a scientist."

"As you would, James," said Crisson, "and will, when we solve the mystery he left behind."

"Do you have such confidence in your own ability to resist terror, gentlemen?" asked Rachel, a trifle mischievously.

"Although he was a scientist of distinction, madame," said Patterway, trying to choose his words carefully, "your late husband did have a slight tendency to... volatility, as Mr. Dearden put it. Not that there is anything wrong in a scientist having passion, of course, but firmness in objectivity is an invaluable asset, and..."

"And you believe that you have it in excess, professor," Dove interjected. "I agree—and before Mr. Crisson begins boasting on his account, I will agree that he too has a valuable dullness of feeling to compliment his natural energy and intellectual acuity... but there are times when mental flexibility is an asset too. Would it be presumptuous of me to suggest that there might be strength in numbers in an inquiry of this sort—that the four of us might constitute a much stronger unit than any one or two of us in isolation."

"Four?" Rachel queried, perhaps having counted five.

"Four?" queried Patterway and Crisson, undoubtedly reluctant to go beyond three, even if they could be persuaded to go that far.

“Whatever you do,” I said, “you must do it without any collaboration from me. But aren’t you getting ahead of yourselves, gentlemen? At present, even if Mrs. Tillinghast is willing to sell or give it you, you have only the remnants of a shattered machine, and whatever information Tillinghast communicated to you while his project was still at a relatively early stage.”

They barely glanced at Rachel, having evidently concluded that she would hand over the machine, one way or another. Their attention was focused on me; all three were convinced that I had to know more. I met their silent censure as forthrightly as I could.

“Are you *sure* that noise is coming from the weathervane, David?” Rachel put in, perhaps thinking that moral support ought to be mutual, and that I might be in need of a certain relief. “Surely we shouldn’t be able to hear it all the way down here as loudly as we could in the attic.”

I suspect that the three visitors hadn’t paid any conscious attention to the creaking until then, dismissing it from consciousness as a mere trifle unworthy of concern—but when Rachel mentioned the word “weathervane” all three of them looked up, reflexively.

I didn’t. Instead, I said: “It’s louder because the wind has increased in force since we were in the laboratory. Local breezes often generate turbulence once darkness has fallen, because the land cools more rapidly than the sea, and...”

“You know, Dearden,” said Dove, interrupting me with a slight edge of anxiety in his voice, “I believe you were right about the canneries. I *can* detect the odor....”

“That’s not the canneries,” said Patterway. “I’ve lived in these parts all my life, and I know what the canneries smell like. That’s the distant stink of a dead whale washed up on the shore.”

“No it’s not,” said Crisson. He leapt to his feet and went to the front door, and threw it open. “It’s not coming on the breeze at all—it’s coming from somewhere in the house.” He stepped out on to the verandah and then leapt down the wooden steps, in order to look back at the house—and *up*.

Rachel made as if to follow him, but I grabbed her by the shoulders. Save for polite handshakes, it was the first time I had ever made physical contact with her. “Don’t,” I said, urgently. “Hold your nose, close your eyes, and try not to listen to that infernal weathervane. Where are Janine and Craven?”

“In the kitchen, I think.”

“Good. Go and join them. Talk to them. Make sure they stay there. Leave this to me. I’m your knight in rusty armor, remember. Trust me now.”

Her blue-green eyes bored into me. Had I been on my own, I think she would have objected, perhaps even thought me mad—but Dove stepped forward and said, rapidly: “Dearden’s right, madame. I felt it when I was here this afternoon—and I knew that he felt it too, although he was still in denial then. Don’t be afraid—I really do believe that the four of us can face it together... but something *is* coming, is it not, Dearden?”

I nodded my head, wanting to get on with it—and whatever Rachel read in my face, she decided that this was no time to argue.

Dove was only half-right, of course. Nothing was *coming*, because it had been here all along, since long before the fatal night of Tillinghast’s last experiment. It had been dormant, but it had been *here*, or at least lurking in some vaster multidimensional space in which *here* was located, waiting for... what? A trigger? An invitation? A catalyst?

Waiting, at any rate, for *me*.

From outside, I heard Crisson’s voice asking, presumably of Patterway: “What do you make of that glow, James? What could cause a weathervane to shine like that, when the moon’s a mere crescent?”

And I heard Patterway reply, in a similarly intimate fashion: “It’s not the vane itself, Bob—it’s definitely some kind of reflection, but I can’t make out whether it’s coming from above not below, or...” He ran out of alternatives then.

“Get them,” I said to Dove. “I’m not so sure that an army could face them, but I’m damned if I’m going up there on my own.” *And doubly damned if I don’t go up at all*, I didn’t add.

THE STAIRS UP TO THE ATTIC WERE TOO NARROW TO allow us to go up four abreast, but not so narrow that we had to go up in single file. I was glad to have Dove by my side and Patterway and Crisson at my back. Suddenly, we were all friends, all ready to stand together, needing to believe that we were capable of standing together. I felt direly ungrateful at having thought of them as vultures, or jackals. Now, I wanted them to be

knights, like me: knights questing for a Holy Grail, who might actually be about to confront it, and might—please God—prove worthy, if not to touch it, at least to withstand its accusing glare, its merciless judgment.

I wanted them to be cool, too, and mentally disciplined, immune to the passionate flaws that had made Tillinghast so vulnerable. I was confident of my own icy objectivity; I had to hope that they could match it, no matter what the monster in the house—the monster *above* the house—proved capable of doing, now that it had been enabled by Tillinghast’s recklessness and my clairvoyance.

I opened the door and stepped through, as if entering another world rather than another room. When all four of us were inside, able to stand in a line again, Crisson closed the door behind him.

I couldn’t be sure whether the fear I could feel was mine or theirs, but I knew that I shouldn’t let the fear feed itself, amplifying itself in a positive feedback loop. I’d made that mistake before.

“What is that?” Crisson whispered, referring to the source of the glow.

I had the advantage; I recognized it.

“It’s either a hallucination,” I said, “or you’re not the only ones who’ve been trying to duplicate Tillinghast’s machine.”

“That’s impossible,” said Patterway—but he only meant that it was “impossible” in the vulgar sense that none of his colleagues or rivals could have got in ahead of him, and certainly couldn’t have sneaked up the stairs while we were in the drawing-room, in order to connect it up to Tillinghast’s batteries. He didn’t mean “impossible” in the sense that it was impossible that there was someone or something out in the wilderness of the manifold of parallel worlds clustered in and around the attic that had observed Tillinghast’s experiments from afar—an *afar* of which Patterway had no conception—and had been far better able than I had been to understand it, to piece it together, and to set it in operation. Clearly, that wasn’t impossible at all. It had happened.

“Now’s your chance,” I told them all. “Real or illusory, every detail that I saw, you can now see. Brace yourselves, because you’re about to see a lot more....”

I was really talking to myself, because I *knew*, in my heart of hearts, or the hidden depths of my brain, that I was about to see far more than I had seen before. I had known all along that what I had seen before was not

purely hallucination, but consciousness is such a valiant shield, such a loving traitor, that I had actually contrived to talk myself out of knowing it while the new sight still lay dormant in me. I had known all along that Tillinghast had been at least half-right, or at least not completely deluded, that his machine hadn't *simply* produced hallucinations, however monstrous, but really had made contact of a sort with the dark matter and dark energy making up the infinite leaves of the ever-present plenum... and that once the pineal body had been altered to recall its ancestral sensory functions, it couldn't possibly forget them again.

Some kinds of eyes can't be closed—but they can open further to let *more light* in.

Distantly, I heard Patterway—I think it was Patterway—start screaming. I heard someone else—Crisson, I presume—battering the closed door with his fists, unable to find the handle or to remember how to turn it. *You couldn't just have unplugged it?* I thought, unkindly. Most of all, however, I heard the screech of the whizzing weathervane, registering a storm like none that New England, or any other place on Earth, had ever experienced.

The attic was crowded now, not with mere floaters, but with creatures that were undoubtedly solid, in their own frameworks of existence, but could only form phantoms in our narrow three-dimensional space, which was far too narrow to contain them. I saw jellyfish that were not jellyfish, cephalopods that were not octopodes, and dead whales that were neither dead nor whales, although they surely stank to high heaven. I heard hisses that were not made by snakes, gurgles that were not made by fermentation in swamps or sewers, and screams that were probably not those of the damned in hell.

And all that was before I looked *up*.

I did not see a monster. Indeed, I did not see any kind of object at all, solid, liquid, or vaporous, sharp, sticky, or slimy. There were no fangs, no tentacles, no glutinous maws. I could see beyond that now. I could see beyond whatever substitutes for hands had forged the replica of Tillinghast's machine out of whatever elements they had found to substitute for those of the tidy periodic table. I could see the entire mass of the dark matter constituting the unseen plenum, and the interplay of the dark energy that gave it activity, and light, and life.

I could see *everything*.

And in seeing everything, I could see how pathetically tiny, infinitely thin, and direly tawdry our mere universe of stars really is, how forlorn the chasms between the stars are, how feeble the fires in the hearts of stars.

Mercifully, there was nothing there to perform the function of a mirror. I could not see myself.

What, in any case, was there to see? Some poor matchstick figure, some pathetic drop of bloody pulp, with a gun in his hand.

Yes, obviously I was still carrying the gun. How could Patterway have imagined, even for a moment, that my mind could have settled sufficiently not to need that absurd prop any longer, even while I was utterly convinced that I was a victim of hallucination?

Had I been a volatile man, I dread to think what might have happened, but I am not. I am an unemotional man, a soul of granite, unbreakable even in the face of the unbearable: an intellectual knight in icy armor.

I took aim, and I fired.

I didn't fire *at* anything, because there was nothing *at* which to fire. There was no monster. But I did take aim, however paradoxical that might sound. I took aim at what I could see, even though it was as infinite as it was incoherent and insubstantial. I took aim, not with my dazzled, terrified eyes, but with my other sight, the sight of my pineal eye.

In this universe, the bullet went between two of the roof-beams, crashed clean through the roof-tile and its supporting felt, and hit the ancient weathervane, whose iron must have been exceedingly fatigued, because it shattered into smithereens.

But the space through which the bullet passed, in our universe, wasn't empty. It was full. In normal circumstances, its fullness would have been utterly irrelevant to the flight of the bullet, because its substance and momentum would not have been perceptible in any of the universes it traversed—but the circumstances were far from normal. The replica of Tillinghast's machine had been displaced from one of those other universes, and it had been activated.

If its activators had known what its effect might be, how dangerous it might be, would they have dared? Perhaps, if they were scientists, more passionate for discovery than safety.

However paradoxical it might seem, I didn't just fire the bullet in our universe. At any other moment of my life, with one possible exception, I

could not have fired it in any other universe *but* this one, but at that particular moment, when the replica of Tillinghast's machine had opened not merely a gateway between the parallel worlds of the plenum, but an infinite series of gateways, that single bullet, or its ricochets, or the backwash of its passing, smashed through a whole series of universes—only a tiny fraction of those packed into the relevant space, in all likelihood, but trillions, of all sorts of shapes and sizes. In some, no doubt, the bullet or its effects would have been no more significant than a drifting particle of dust, but in others...

Size is relative, but size *matters*.

I cannot be certain, but I firmly believe that I destroyed entire universes. I cannot be certain, but I firmly believe that I created others. I cannot be certain, but I firmly believe that I precipitated metamorphoses in others. Or rather, whatever it was that had opened that catastrophic series of gateways, whatever it was that had created that uniquely privileged instant, that unparalleled opportunity, had allowed and caused me to wreak havoc on a literally unimaginable scale.

Should I have held my fire? Perhaps—but think on this: if I had not fired that shot so rapidly, or had my aim not been as true, *what might have happened to our universe?*

Maybe nothing. Maybe the intentions of the duplicators of Tillinghast's machine were benign. Maybe they had no intention of destruction, and maybe any metamorphosis they wrought, accidentally or deliberately, would have been paradisaical in its consequences. I don't know. But I know that I was afraid. I know that that I was terrified. I know that when I saw *everything*, in spite of my coolness of mind and my indomitable indifference, I was overwhelmed by such an appalling cosmic horror that I was not at all sure that I could return from that existential brink alive or sane.

I honestly believe that firing that shot saved my life, and the lives of my companions, and the lives of Rachel and her servants, if not those of the entire human race, even though my dutiful, mercilessly objective conscience persists in telling me, coldly, that my miserable, wretched, discontented life—even if multiplied a billion times—could not possibly counterbalance a trillionth of the damage that I did, in the pan of any

reasonable scales of cosmic justice. In the ultimate scheme of things, there is probably no evil greater than mine, for the time being.

But I did live through it, and I believe that I have conserved my sanity... or the better part of it, at least... or, if not the better part, the remainder....

My companions lived too, and perhaps it was as well, for my sake, that they were there, to lend me their tacit support. They swore afterwards that no replica of Tillinghast's machine had ever been there, and that all the entities they had seen were mere hallucinations, precursors of terrible migraines. They lost all interest in reconstituting Tillinghast's machine themselves, however, even though they had seen its constitution for themselves, before it was folded away into some fourth-dimensional pocket, or sewer, or bottomless abyss.

James Patterway resigned his professorship at Miskatonic and went on a long sea voyage—for the benefit of his health, he said. Robert Crisson gave up his attempts at invention and devoted himself to collecting art instead, although his tastes were far too *avant garde* for respectable New England. Lyman Dove wrote book after book summarizing the supposed secrets of the occult, of which no one understood a word. Crisson kept financing their publication regardless, because he and Dove had become fast friends, in spite of the differences in their social origins and philosophies. I still see Dove occasionally, and we do chat about the mysteries of the plenum, but I have to confess that even I can't understand a word of what he says about it.

Rachel was curious, of course—extremely curious—but, as her loyal knight and shield against misfortune, I told her that the four of us had been affected by some kind of residual miasma left over from her late husband's experiment, but that it had been dispelled and that there was no further danger. I apologized for having put a hole in her roof, but explained that I obviously did not react well to hallucinations and had an unfortunate tendency to panic. I told her that I was going to stop carrying a gun and would simply have to learn to live with my sense of insecurity.

She donated all of Tillinghast's papers to the library at Miskatonic, where they were filed away in some obscure corner. Whether anyone will ever consult them, I don't know. She gave the university the shards of the machine as well, but without Patterway there to protect them, I think they were eventually condemned as rubbish and thrown out. She sold the house, but the new owners did not live in it long, moving out because they felt

uneasy there. It gained the reputation of being haunted, but at least the commercial loss wasn't Rachel's.

I still see Rachel occasionally, in the suburbs of Providence or in her house by the sea, but there's nothing between us. Neither of us is content, but there is nothing we can do to alleviate that condition. I could never substitute, in her strange eyes, for her beloved Crawford—and how can I ever marry? How can I ever forgive myself, knowing what I have done, and knowing that I did it deliberately, having *taken aim*?

How can I even live with myself?

I'm not sure—except when I have my migraines, and my pineal body allows my brain to see what it can now see, under the right conditions. Then I'm sure, alas. According to my ophthalmologist, things can only get worse. One day, I'll go blind—and what will I see then? What will I be unable to avoid seeing, for lack of any possible distraction?

Monsters might come to devour me in the interim, I suppose—but that, believe me, is the least of my worries.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

S. T. Joshi is the author of *The Weird Tale* (University of Texas Press, 1990), *The Modern Weird Tale* (McFarland, 2001), *Unutterable Horror: A History of Supernatural Fiction* (PS Publishing, 2012), and other critical and biographical studies. His award-winning biography, *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life* (Necronomicon Press, 1996), has been expanded and updated as *I Am Providence: The Life and Times of H. P. Lovecraft* (Hippocampus Press, 2010). He has edited Lovecraft's stories, essays, letters, and revisions, as well as works by Ambrose Bierce, Arthur Machen, Lord Dunsany, Algernon Blackwood, and other writers.

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